A Witch's Legacy

Hesketh Bell

A WITCH'S LEGACY

BY

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AUTHOR OF

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CHAPTER I.

In a soft, silk-grass hammock sat a tall, manly-looking young fellow. He had broad, square shoulders, curly hair and honest grey eyes, and was altogether a good specimen of a strong, healthy young Englishman.

It was a December morning, about four years ago. The glorious sun was shining with all its might, bringing joy to the hearts of the many-tinted butterflies and dainty little humming-birds which flitted gaily about, flirting with the little yellow blossoms that peeped out of the grass.

As may well be imagined, the scene is not laid in dear, damp, muggy old England, where the glorious sun in December hardly dares to show his frost-bitten nose, and

where humming-birds are replaced by staid and sober-grey sparrows, who flirt in a practical manner with any unhappy worm which may have escaped the notice of some earlier forager.

The silk-grass hammock swings, and the humming-birds flit, three thousand miles away, in one of the loveliest of the thousand lovely islands of the West Indian Archipelago.

Jack Moresby lazily stretches himself, joins his hands behind his head, digs the heels of his riding-boots into the soft green turf, and inhales the spice-laden breeze with indolent satisfaction. The hammock hangs under the broad-spreading branches of a giant tamarind, and the cool shade of the myriads of tiny leaves forms a dark island of refreshing shadow in the surrounding sea of brilliant glare and sunshine.

The landscape which spreads itself out in the valley beneath the young planter is very beautiful. There are bright green fields of waving sugar-canes, that gently undulate when the soft breeze passes over them. Here and there stately palmistes rear their plumed crests a hundred feet

above the surrounding vegetation, and a fringe of feathery bamboos follows the serpentine course of a rippling stream that winds its way to the broad blue ocean in the distance, like a silver ribbon gleaming in the sunlight.

In the middle of a green pasture stand the plantation buildings; the broad white walls, the tall, black chimney, and the red-tiled roofs relieving the monotony of the surrounding verdure. A distant sound of busy life and toil rises in the clear atmosphere, and the splash of the glistening water-wheel, the lowing of the cattle in the pen, and the hum of the busy negroes carrying canes to the mill, form a gentle accompaniment to the never-ceasing buzz of the insects.

Moresby lets his eyes wander over the bright scene with lazy satisfaction, and his lips part in a smile of conscious pride in the possession of so fair a domain. He has just ridden round a part of the estate, and the forward condition of the sugar-canes has given him visions of a glorious crop. There are few happier men than he at that moment in Grenadilla, but his thoughts are far away, and the mind-picture of two

violet eyes and of a row of pearly teeth fills his eyes with a tender gleam.

"The mail bag has come, sah!" says a white-clad black servant, who had approached unheeded by the young planter.

"Ah, all right, Richard. Thanks. Tell Tom that I shall want the mare after lunch."

The satchel, on being unlocked, produced a bundle of miscellaneous letters and papers, which did not apparently contain anything of much interest for their recipient. One letter after another was opened and quickly tossed aside, and soon the grass around the hammock was strewn with various-coloured envelopes.

"Another one, of course," muttered Jack, tearing open the fourth thin blue envelope. "Yes, £73 odd; confound them, they needn't be so deuced impatient. Cheque will oblige. Repairs to carts and water-wheel—um—£47 5*s.*—absurd! Ha, what's this one? Merton, £14, for cartage last year. That's not ruinous. Have to wait till after crop though. Now, what's this?" he continued, opening the last of the contents of the bag.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, hurriedly running his eyes over the paper.

CHAMBERS, WILLIAMTOWN, GRENADILLA.
5 *Dec.*, 18—.

SIR,—I have to inform you with much regret that I received a communication by last mail from Messrs. Bootle, Bootle and Spen, instructing me to take, at once, the necessary steps to foreclose the mortgage which they hold over your estate "Palm Vale." Certain pecuniary reverses have forced them to this measure, and it is absolutely necessary that they should re-enter into possession of a portion of their invested capital.

As you are doubtless aware, "Palm Vale" has not paid even the interest on its mortgages for nearly two years past, and taking into consideration the present depressed state of the sugar market, which does not promise any prospect of amelioration, you will not, I feel sure, consider that my clients are acting harshly or prematurely in pressing for a settlement.

I sincerely hope that the inconvenience may be purely temporary to you, and that you may find other capitalists who will, doubtless, be glad to take over the liabilities of your estate.

Yours faithfully,
JOHN PASTON.

To JOHN F. MORESBY, Esq., "Palm Vale."

"Great heaven! Impossible," muttered Jack, half-dazed as he read the letter again. "But I can't get anyone else! and the fellow knows it. The hound, springing this

on me in such a way! He knows well enough that it will be simply impossible to get any firm fool enough to take over the liabilities of the estate. What on earth am I going to do? It's ruin——," and the unfortunate young fellow strode feverishly up and down, spasmodically crumpling in his hand the fatal letter.

"Good God, I can't realise it! Lose the old place after all!—after all this worry and struggle?—impossible!"

Ay! It was indeed hard luck to have to give up such a fine old place as "Palm Vale" with its broad acres, massive buildings, and handsome old "Great House" as the negroes called the mansion. Jack Moresby's earliest memories were connected with every corner of the fine old plantation. It had been the proud boast of his father that "Palm Vale" had belonged to the Moresbys ever since Grenadilla had been first colonised, and the ashes of a long line of sturdy planters lay at rest, according to Grenadillan custom, in the little private cemetery, under the bright oleanders and trailing stephanotis, at the end of the garden.

He remembered the tales his old, coloured nurse used to tell him of the good old days gone by, when sugar was worth £40 a hogshead, and before good "Massa Willyfass" had set the negroes free. Those were the good days of yore, when the plantation yielded an income equal to that of many a lord of to-day, and when the Moresby of "Palm Vale" owned three hundred slaves, and kept seven house-servants in livery, and was generally considered a much greater man in the island than the governor himself.

But, alas! it had been the same old story, so well-known in the West Indies. First, the emancipation of the negroes, the decreasing value of sugar; then the obstinacy of the sturdy old planter, and his aversion to new-fangled ideas, sticking to sugar when other industries would have paid ten times better; and, finally, the hopeless battle of West Indian cane sugar against the bounty-fed continental beet.

Jack's father, like the majority of planters of the *vieille école*, was too much wrapped up in the old traditions, and clung too desperately to the cultivation which he had

been born and bred to count on, to start afresh in his old age with other crops, of which he knew nothing, and which he looked upon with that prejudice against innovations which old sugar planters are remarkable for.

"Oh, nonsense," he would say, angrily, to younger and wiser men, who would urge him to start cocoa or some other paying product. "Oh, nonsense, my good fellow! Sugar *must* pay in the end, and the old country, when she finds out our desperate straits, will come to our help. You can rely on that."

But it was not so. Sugar did not pay, nor did the old country turn her eyes towards her struggling sons in the West Indies; but they were told that all's free and fair in trade, and moreover, that God helped those that helped themselves.

Matters went from bad to worse. The price of sugar ran lower and lower, and it looked as if, in the fierce competition with the continental beet, the old West Indian planters must go to the wall. At "Palm Vale" money was raised on mortgage year after year, in order to make good a deficit

on the estimate of a crop, or to pay the interest on existing mortgages, until the liabilities were so great that it seemed hopeless to think that the estate could ever be cleared, or, indeed, that any more money could be raised on its security.

Jack knew little or nothing of all this. The letters which he received from his father while at Rugby, and later on at Cambridge, would contain complaints about the falling off in the value of sugar, and now and then the old planter would refer to some wretched mortgage or other, but in terms which did not lead Jack to guess the depth of difficulty into which his father had fallen. At last, however, just as he was about to take his degree, he received a letter, begging him to come out to Grenadilla with as little delay as possible. The poor old planter had been struck down by paralysis, and although he had partially recovered, feared that a second stroke was imminent, and begged his son to come out as quickly as possible, so that he might see him once more before he died.

Jack took the first steamer out, and was inexpressibly grieved, on arriving at "Palm

Vale" to find his old father very weak and evidently almost on the brink of the grave.

The shock, however, was not so serious as had been apprehended at first, and the old planter was so delighted to find his boy grown into such a handsome, manly fellow that he rallied, and was soon almost like his old self again. He was, however, not nearly as strong as he imagined himself to be, and was quite unable to battle single-handed with the worry and ever-increasing difficulties of the estate. Jack, accordingly, put off his return to England to some future period, when things might be looking more prosperous, and more settled in one way or another. In the meantime, he devoted all his energies to the management of the estate, and it was only when looking over the books and accounts that he discovered how deeply involved the place was. He found that the plantation which, ten or fifteen years before, had yielded an income of four or five thousand a year, had of late years not only not given any profit at all, but the books showed a clear loss on every hogshead of sugar manufactured and shipped. The interest on the existing

mortgages could only be paid by raising money at high rates of interest, and it was quite clear that unless the price of sugar went up in a phenomenal degree, the mortgages would shortly be foreclosed, and the estate sold.

Jack toiled and struggled manfully, but to little purpose. The account sales every mail day showed the same wretched prices, and after two years of hard fighting, the balance on the wrong side was as large as ever. Jack, however, refused to be beaten, and after a good deal of coaxing, required to overcome the old planter's conservative prejudices, had won his consent to devoting as much money as could be raised to the establishment of a cocoa plantation in the mountain lands of the estate. He pinned all his hopes on this cocoa, and was convinced that if only they could keep possession of the estate and tide over difficulties for another three or four years, the profits realised from it would go a long way towards clearing off the debts incurred by the sugar-cane.

Old Mr. Moresby's stroke of paralysis had weakened him very much, and a few months

before the opening of this tale, a second attack overcame him, and the sturdy old planter closed his eyes in the arms of his son. His last words were—"Stick to the old place, Jack, stick to it, my dear boy. Sugar *must* come round again."

Jack was terribly grieved by the death of his father. Although so long separated from him, he had always had the greatest affection for him, and the thought that he was now entirely alone in the world, and would have to battle single-handed against all the difficulties which surrounded his prospects, was anything but cheering. He, however, determined to abide by his father's last words, and resolved never to give up the old place until he should be forcibly dispossessed of it. The idea of giving up to strangers the broad fields which five generations of his family had held before him, was unbearable. Since his father's death he had worked on manfully, and his pet cocoa cultivation which was to retrieve the estate was coming on well.

Love for his old home was not, however, the only sentiment which had impelled Jack Moresby to work so hard to retrieve his

fallen fortunes. There was a maiden very fair not many miles away from Palm Vale whose image persistently occupied a very central position in all the young planter's projects for the future. Until his fortunes were placed on a more secure and satisfactory basis, he knew full well that the idea of marriage was not to be contemplated, and it was the ultimate hope of bringing Violet Lee to his old home as his own loving wife that had cheered and encouraged him to leave no stone unturned to free the estate from the load of debt under which it groaned.

And now, the ground seemed to have been suddenly cut away from under his feet. All his work had been useless, or had only served to enhance the value of the plantation for some one else's benefit. It was terribly hard to think that another man should own those smiling cane-fields and that dear old house which had been the home of his ancestors for so long. As he looked at it now, it seemed to him that it had never appeared so pretty, or so well worth possessing. Built in the old days of slave labour, neither time nor expense had

been spared to make the mansion worthy of the estate.

It was a great rambling stone building with all sorts of queer roofs and corners, half covered with crimson-flowered creepers. The ground-floor was surrounded by a broad cool piazza, where a profusion of light wicker-work lounges and tables were scattered about over the black and white marble pavement. Hammocks swung in the corners, sheltered from the sunlight by thick curtains of climbing plants, whose blossoms filled the air with fragrance. Although Jack Moresby was a young bachelor, and a rather untidy one, the cool spacious drawing-room was full of pretty nick-nacks, and the polished floors were so bright that they reflected the brilliant flowers which filled every table and bracket, throwing a cheery note of colour in the reposeful shade of the cool dark room. Such flowers, too! Gorgeous blossoms, which in old England's temperate climate it would require a palace of glass to raise, bloomed here in almost wild wealth, in the old-fashioned garden which surrounded the house. Orchids, which in other climes only rich men could

possess, displayed their wondrous blossoms from scores of hanging baskets all around the verandah, and grew and bloomed almost unnoticed among the mass of bright coloured leaves and brilliant shrubs.

Jack was justly proud of his house, for it was altogether as lovely a home as could be found in the West Indies, which is not saying little.

"I'll make one more try," said he, at last, thrusting his unwelcome letter deep into his pocket; "and if I can only get some one to advance enough to pay off the interest on Boodle's mortgage, I'll have one more fight for the dear old place."

CHAPTER II.

A VERY quaint and pretty little place is Williamtown, the chief port and principal place of business in Grenadilla. It lies clustered over the undulating hills which surround the loveliest harbour that could be imagined.

Cocoanut-palms and palmistes grow right down to the water's edge, and all over the amphitheatre-like hills, coquettish little villas and bungalows peep out of clumps of fragrant *frangipani* trees and scarlet-blossomed *flamboyants.*

The town proper, with its steep paved streets and its houses built of brick and roofed with bright red tiles, reminds one of a quaint Brittany *bourg*, but the old Norman *paysannes*, with their snowy caps and rosy-cheeked little brats in noisy *sabots*, are here replaced by stalwart negresses in bright coloured gowns and by tiny coal-

black piccaninnies, toddling along in the dust and glare, guiltless of *sabots* or even of clothing of any sort.

Jack nearly rode over two or three of the small mites as he trotted his pony noisily over the cobble stones, and in his preoccupation hardly noticed the smiling nods of two or three pretty but rather pallid-looking girls, who were driving out in the family buggy to enjoy the cool afternoon breeze which was just beginning to blow.

He had hardly made up his mind as to where he was going. He had already tried the agents of most of the important firms in Williamtown, and found that it was hopeless to knock at their doors. In despair he determined to make a final attempt at the Bank.

Banks in the West Indies do all sorts of business, and their principal profits are derived from negotiations in land, plantations and other immovable property. Jack knew that the Bank was his last and only chance, and notwithstanding his youthful hopefulness, he could not but acknowledge to himself that there was but little hope of his application for the heavy sum he required being entertained.

As he rode up to the door, he found the manager's carriage with its smart pair of black ponies standing ready, and a moment after, just as he was dismounting, he met Mr. Fenton, the bank manager himself, coming down the steps of the office, clad in flannels and swinging a tennis racket in his hand.

"Hullo, Moresby!" said Mr. Fenton in his rather high pitched, but not unpleasant voice; "not going to tennis this afternoon? How's that? I thought it was arranged that you should finish those singles that you began the other day with Trafford. But you look glum, my dear boy,—what's the matter now? Come in and have a drink, my wife won't be ready for a minute or two—never is," grumbled Mr. Fenton under his breath. "Here, Samuel, just take Mr. Moresby's horse."

"Well, I've enough to make any fellow look glum," returned Jack, despondently, as he followed the banker into the house. "I've come down in a hurry to speak to you on a very serious matter, and I only hope you'll be able to help me. I shan't keep you very long, not more than a few minutes."

"Business, eh?" returned the manager. "Well, come into the office and we'll talk it over a little; but don't keep me too long, my dear fellow, or I shall have my wife saying, as she always does when she gets the chance, that I never fail to keep her waiting."

Mr. Fenton was a very worthy man, and his own estimation of himself fully endorsed the public opinion. He was perhaps a trifle bland sometimes, especially to those who were "somebodies," but it was generally accepted that taking him altogether he was a "decent sort." In the smaller colonies of the Western seas, the manager of the local bank is usually rather an important personage. He knew, and had to know, everything about everyone, especially as regarded their pockets, and in this respect Mr. Fenton was a pre-eminently good bank manager. Rarely did the agency under his charge make a bad debt, and although obliging enough in the matter of bills, renewals, etc., he was always very civil but unyielding when he thought the security was not quite as good as it should be.

Mr. Fenton had, however, been a good

friend to old Mr. Moresby, and Jack hoped that he might accordingly stretch a point in his favour, and possibly get the bank to advance the necessary money to clear off the most pressing mortgage on the estate.

But when the manager was placed in possession of all the facts, and learnt the full extent of the liabilities and mortgages, he at once saw that the case was a hopeless one.

"I very much fear, my dear boy, that you must throw up the sponge, and it is really very creditable to you to have worked so hard under such adverse circumstances. With the present price of sugar—and I fear there is no immediate prospect of a rise—it is an impossibility to clear 'Palm Vale' of the immense debt upon it. Indeed, I very much doubt whether, if sold, the place would even realise anything like the amount of the mortgages, let alone the interest already due."

"But you forget the young cocoa cultivation," Jack ventured to remark. "In three or four years' time it ought to give three hundred bags at least, and go on increasing every year."

"Oh, yes, I dare say, my dear Moresby," returned the manager, as he smoothed the blotting-pad in front of him; "but in the meantime who is to pay the piper? No; it is useless to think of it. I dare say it will be a great wrench to you, parting with the estate, but remember, that in these bad times, you are not the only one in the same predicament. Make the best of the inevitable, and pluck up courage. Turn your thoughts and energies to something else. Why, my dear fellow, you only want two or three dinners more to make you a barrister, I think you told me once. Why don't you try to get a magistracy in the island, or something of that sort? It would pay you very much better in the end, than trying to struggle on with a moribund industry on an estate crippled with debt."

Jack was most reluctant to see the matter in that light, but was forced to confess that the manager's arguments were sound, and confirmed all his worst fears and apprehensions.

"I am very sorry, indeed, for you, Moresby, my boy," said the manager, as he rose to shake hands with Jack, "but you'll

find I am right, and if you apply to the Governor for a billet, I will put in a good word for you."

Jack left the bank with a heavy heart. He had ridden into town almost certain that his case was a hopeless one, but still buoyed up with the sanguine nature of youth, and still hoping against his better reason, that he might possibly, after all, find some satisfactory way out of the dilemma.

Things looked very black, indeed, and although he was forced to confess that it was now hopeless to think of keeping Palm Vale, yet he could hardly bring himself to form any plans for the future, in which the estate did not play a part. Trying to shake off these gloomy thoughts, Jack put his pony to a canter, and the exhilarating sensation of rushing rapidly through the cool breeze that blew from the shore, brightened him up a little. Presently, on turning a bend in the winding road, his eyes fell on another rider, a few hundred yards ahead, the sight of whom caused his heart to flutter and beat faster, as he urged his pony to a quicker pace.

Violet Lee made a charming picture as she rode her lively grey pony with all the ease of a consummate horsewoman. She wore a daintily fitting dark-green habit, a most coquettish little white helmet on her head, and absurdly small pipeclayed gloves on the tiny but firm hands which kept her skittish mount well in check.

The pleasantest hours of her life in Grenadilla were those she passed on horseback, in her somewhat lonely rides. Good riding-roads are not very numerous in that part of the island; but Violet never tired of them, and to her, the feathery bamboos, the waving sugar-canes, and the clustering silver ferns which bordered the paths, ever presented fresh charms and unnoticed beauties. At the sound of her pony's footsteps, the black women and children would peep out of their little thatched huts, and smile a cheery "Good evening, miss," as she cantered by.

The sound of Jack's pony trotting on the hard road caused her to look round, and a charming blush of conscious pleasure suffused her creamy cheeks as she recognised the rider. Jack thought he had

never seen her look more lovely, as he noticed the deep true expression of her dark violet eyes, the little pink shell-like ears, and the short rosy upper lip disclosing a row of pearly teeth.

"How delightful to meet you on this dismal lonely road, Miss Violet, especially just as I was thinking ever so much about you."

"Dismal lonely road," quickly returned Violet, coquettishly ignoring the latter part of Jack's phrase; "really, if I did not know you so well, I should feel alarmed, and inclined to scream lustily for help. Solitary young lady overtaken by a horseman on a dismal lonely road, makes one think of Jack Sheppard and highway robbery. But how can you call it dismal and lonely? I was just thinking as you rode up, what a charming path it is; the feathery bamboos arch so beautifully overhead, and make the road beneath so delightfully cool and shady," then looking at Jack with a charming expression of sympathy: "But you don't look happy, Mr. Moresby. I hope you have not heard any bad news?"

"Unfortunately, that is just the case,"

returned Jack dolefully, "I fear it's not the road that is lonely and dismal, but rather the reflection of my thoughts, while I was riding along. I'm sorry to say I have had awfully bad news to-day, and I ought to have expected it, for I feared very much that it was bound to come sooner or later."

"I do hope it is nothing very bad," rejoined Violet almost anxiously, as she looked at Jack, "and probably you imagine that things are worse than they really are."

"They couldn't be worse," said Jack. "I must give up the old place, and with it, I fear, all my plans and dreams for the future, but," continued Jack, in a low voice, "the thought that I have your sympathy will help me to bear it ever so much better."

Jack was quickly throwing all his scruples and good resolutions to the wind. He had loved Violet, ever since he had seen her, on his first visit at "Belvoir," her mother's place, but knowing his embarrassed position and the utter absurdity of even thinking of getting married until he was in more prosperous circumstances, he had done his best to put away all such ideas. His prudence,

however, was not strong enough to keep him from going very often to Belvoir, and every time he met Violet there, or at the dances and picnics where they were constantly being brought together, the conviction that he loved her with all his heart, and that it was no passing young man's fancy, had grown into him. He could see, too, by the thousand and one little signs which lovers alone can notice, that he was not indifferent to her. The thought that if his position improved he could show himself able to support a wife in comfort, had nerved him to work with renewed energy, and to do his utmost to clear Palm Vale, so that he might one day hope to win her and her mother's consent to their union.

But now, Paston's letter had thrown all these hopes and plans to the ground, and during that day, the idea that he must no longer think of Violet, had been harder to bear than the prospect of losing the estate.

This *tête-à-tête* with Violet, and the evident tender sympathy which she showed for his troubles, had caused his suppressed love for her to break out with ten-fold

vigour; the sight of her sweet face swept away all his good resolutions, and the force of his passion could be restrained no longer.

"Violet! my darling," he broke out, resting his hand upon her pony's neck. "I can't help it, I must speak, I know I ought not to, my sweet one, but——"

"De—Dear me, why I de—de—declare it's Miss Lee and M-m-mister Moresby!" broke in a wheezy stuttering old voice, as Jack hastily withdrew his hand from the neck of Violet's pony, and looked round with a very murderous scowl at the most inopportune intruder.

The owner of the aggravating stutter was a wizened-up, wiry, little man, whose years might be anything between fifty and seventy. He was an attorney for several plantations belonging to absentee proprietors, rejoiced in the patronymic of Smith, was popularly supposed to have heaps of money, and was voted by everyone to be a fussy, inquisitive, little bore of the worst type.

The poor man appeared to be afflicted with all sorts of troublesome infirmities, but he seemed to be quite proud of them,

and credited himself with a good many more than he really possessed. He complained of being excessively short-sighted, but it was shrewdly suspected by everyone that this infirmity was carefully cultivated, and much exaggerated, as it gave old Smith numerous opportunities for covert observation of his neighbours and their affairs. A man who vowed that without his spectacles he could not distinguish even the largest objects within a yard of his nose, could hardly be suspected of reading people's letters over their shoulders, or of taking sundry other little observations, which enabled old Smith to be always more intimately acquainted with his neighbour's affairs than any one else was.

Jack and Violet had been so much engrossed in each other's conversation, that this particular old man of the name of Smith had been able to ride up quite unnoticed, and notwithstanding his alleged very defective vision, had taken in the whole scene at once, and had rapidly drawn the obvious conclusion.

Quite impervious to Jack's frowns, or to Violet's very cold "Good evening," Mr.

Smith had evidently determined that there should be no further *tête-à-tête* business, so long as he could help it, and he calmly jogged along by Violet's side, pouring out a flood of stuttering gabble, and hardly waiting for an answer to his never-ceasing questions.

"And h-h-h-have you enjoyed your ride, Miss Lee?" went on old Smith, adding, with a chuckle, which he meant to be especially facetious, "I'm sure you and Mr. Moresby m-m-m-must have been p-p-p-planning some deeply-laid p-p-p-plot, for I came right up to you quite unobserved, indeed," the old bore continued with a meaning look, "I gave t-t-t-two or three warning c-c-coughs, but you did not seem to notice them."

Jack felt inclined to kick him, but Violet turned round towards Mr. Smith with her woman's superior presence of mind, and told him with a sweet smile, that she had enjoyed her ride very much, and even took the trouble to inform him that she was so fond of riding, that she generally went out for a little canter every afternoon round "Belvoir," but that to-day she had

ventured as far as the high road, as she was getting tired of the cane-traces, which were rather monotonous.

"Oh, yes, indeed, very n-n-n-nice, very n-n-n-nice, indeed," acquiesced old Smith, making a mental remark that Violet had quite forgotten to say how and where Jack came into the story. "And how are Mrs. Lee and your s-s-s-sister? I do hope they are b-b-both well. I have been p-p-promising myself for a long time the p-p-pleasure of calling at Belvoir, but have been so very b-b-busy of late, with one thing and another, that I really have not had t-t-t-time."

Violet inwardly hoped that Mr. Smith's business might increase and multiply greatly so that he might perchance not have time to call at Belvoir, before he was finally gathered to his fathers.

Jack was intensely disgusted at this endless interruption, and hoping to shake off the old bore, proposed to Violet that they should have a little canter. So turning to Mr. Smith, he significantly remarked, "I suppose we shall be going a little too fast for your pony, Mr. Smith, so *au revoir*."

"Oh, Lord b-b-bless you, no," jauntily returned the old incubus, as he shook up his venerable white pony, and kept pace with the two young people. "Old B-B-Bess, here, likes a c-c-canter now and then, and I don't m-m-mind it either."

There was evidently no shaking off this old man of the sea, and it is to be feared that the thoughts of the two young people regarding him were neither charitable nor Christian-like.

Old Smith kept up his interminable wearisome chatter all the way, until the trio arrived at the road which led to Palm Vale. Jack wanted to accompany Violet as far as Belvoir, but Mr. Smith had declared himself so determined to see Miss Lee safely back in her mother's charge, that he relinquished the idea, knowing that so long as the old nuisance stuck to them, there would be no chance of another word alone with Violet. Jack had accordingly to content himself with an eloquent squeeze of Violet's hand and a fond look into her eyes, before he finally turned off into the road leading up to his estate.

The delightful consciousness that Violet

was not indifferent to him filled his heart with a great joy and a feeling of happiness, which could hardly be suppressed by the recurring remembrance of his troubles and dismal prospects. He tried hard to reconcile his mind to leaving Palm Vale, and turned over all sorts of plans and projects for the future. He would try to follow the banker's advice, and by the help of two or three influential friends, might hope to slip into some vacant stipendiary magistracy which might perhaps be in the Governor's gift. But try as he would, all his plans and projects would persist in getting mixed up with thoughts about the estate, and he felt it would be impossible for him ever to look with complacency on the idea of Palm Vale being in the possession of another, or to abandon for ever his dream of bringing Violet, as his own little wife, to the old home of his family.

On this particular evening, as he rode along the winding avenue of cocoanut palms, the prospect of being forcibly dispossessed was especially hard. The spreading cane-fields and the handsome plantation buildings had never seemed to him so much

worth owning. The mansion, surrounded by gorgeous scarlet *flamboyant* trees and clumps of lofty palms, was on a slight eminence, and caught the last rays of the setting sun. There was such a soft air of home and repose in the old place, that as Jack looked lovingly at it, he could not entirely repress the tears which welled up in his eyes at the idea of losing his fair inheritance.

The short tropic twilight was drawing to a close, the gorgeous colours of the western sky had faded, and were being gently replaced by the tenderest tints of orange and gold; the birds had ceased their evening twitter, and the buzzing hum of countless insects was gradually filling the air. Jack rode on listlessly with the bridle hanging loosely on his pony's neck, when suddenly he spied the figure of a man standing in the shadow of one of the palms that bordered the avenue.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?" called out Jack, reining up his pony. "Come out from that shadow, man, and let me see you," he continued, as the individual still skulked in the shade.

"What! is that you again, you rascal?" angrily exclaimed Jack; "out already? The magistrate didn't give you half enough. Had it been in my power you would have had six months."

"I don't doubt it," muttered the man with a sneer, as he advanced a little out of the shadow. "I don't doubt it; but mark me, my young fighting cock, you'll rue the day you laid hands on me, or my name's not Sandy Sneat."

"Get off the estate, you blackguard, or I'll give you a worse hiding than the last," exclaimed Jack, fairly roused and riding up threateningly towards the man, who retreated gradually; "you have no business here, and if I ever find you again within my boundaries, I'll have you in gaol again before you know where you are."

"Ha, ha!" sneeringly laughed the man as he turned away towards the high road. "Mighty fine and plucky, I daresay," he muttered, "but he'd better look after his skin if I catch him alone on a dark night," and the evil glance which the man shot at Jack's retreating figure boded little good

to that young gentleman if he ever got into the blackguard's power.

Slinking back into the shadow of the trees, he pursued his way towards the estate buildings, keeping, however, out of sight of Jack.

The man who had thus raised Jack's ire to rather an unnecessary degree, was a thorough blackguard, and quite deserved all the epithets which Jack had so liberally applied to him. He was a rather tall, lean, and sparely built man of about thirty, with a sallow pasty complexion and sharp pointed features that reminded one of a weasel. His eyes were black and small, and glistened with an intense expression of low cunning. This expression was rendered doubly disagreeable by the almost entire absence of eyelashes and eyebrows. His clothes, most seedy and tattered, hung on him like rags on a scarecrow, and, judging from his outward appearance, Sandy Sneat was evidently not in a thriving position.

He had been originally a sailor, but some three years before the opening of this tale he had deserted his ship, and for reasons

best known to himself had remained in Grenadilla ever since. A lazy good-for-nothing rascal, he had lived during those years almost from hand to mouth, only doing odd jobs now and again just to keep himself from starving, and spending any money he could get hold of, honestly or otherwise, in solitary drunken bouts at the native "shebeens." Once or twice during the three years he had worn the broad arrow on his back, during a few months at a time, for minor offences, and altogether Sandy Sneat was as worthless a character as it was possible to find in Grenadilla.

For some reason or other he had chosen to make Palm Vale his headquarters, generally sleeping under some convenient shed in the estate buildings, where he escaped the eye of the watchman, or sometimes housed during the rainy reason out of pity by some charitable black, who was sorry to see a white man so degraded.

Sneat had several times come under Jack's unfavourable notice, in connection with suspected thefts of small articles about the estate, and had become an object of

special aversion to the young planter, who had warned him off the plantations several times.

One day, when riding round the estate, Jack came upon him in the act of torturing an unfortunate ownerless dog in such a particularly atrocious manner that, boiling over with disgust and indignation, he had jumped off, rushed up to the brute, and administered to him such a thorough thrashing with his stirrup leather, that when some of the labourers, hearing Sandy's cries, came up, they found the rascal completely subdued and quite reconciled to following them to the lock-up or anywhere else, provided he should be out of the irate young planter's grip.

The magistrate had promptly awarded him a month's hard labour for cruelty to animals, and during his period of enforced activity, Mr. Sneat nourished feelings with regard to Jack that were very far from being in accordance with the Catechism.

When Moresby came upon him in the avenue, the man had only been two or three days out of gaol, and had returned to Palm Vale with the express intention of

doing his utmost to square off some of his score with the young planter.

Instead of obeying Jack by clearing off the estate at once, he persisted, without exactly knowing why, in following him stealthily, keeping well out of sight, however, while doing so. Presently he saw that Jack had reined up, and was being addressed by a little black girl, who was volubly pouring out a torrent of words in very broken English. Sandy thought he might as well hear what it was all about, so noiselessly creeping through the bushes, he advanced to within hearing distance.

"My good girl," Jack was saying, "I don't understand you; do you mean that the old Obeah woman is very sick and wants to see me?"

"Yes, sah!" answered the girl, "old Mammy Quamina be very sick for true; she say she gwine to die, and she say she can't die without she see you first, sah!"

"I wonder what on earth the old hag can want with me?" Jack said to himself.

"All right, little girl, show me where Quamina lives. I'll follow," said he, as the girl led the way towards a little thatched

hut standing solitary on the hillside in a clump of plantain bushes.

"What the devil can the old witch want him for?" also wondered Sneat, who had heard the girl's message; "I'll try and find out. There must be somethin' rum going on, and I may as well be in it," said the man to himself, as he quickly followed Jack towards the old witch's hut.

CHAPTER III.

It had now become quite dark, and Jack had to let his pony pick its way carefully along the rough narrow track which led to old Quamina's hut. As he neared the wretched little tumble-down shanty, he heard most dismal groans proceeding from the interior. Evidently the old woman was very ill, so quickly hitching his pony's bridle to a tree, he followed the little black girl into the hut.

At first he had some difficulty in distinguishing objects, there being no light, save that afforded by a very small tin lamp on the ground, which only served to make the gloom more visible. This flickering gleam seemed to struggle with the draughts that whistled through the rickety plank walls, and a film of heavy black smoke ascended slowly from it up to the rotten thatched roof above, probably to the disgust

of the spiders, centipedes, and other insects which had lived there for long years undisturbed.

Gradually Jack's eyes made out what appeared to him to be a bundle of dirty rags lying on a wretched native straw mattress stretched on the ground. On drawing nearer, he found that these rags covered the decrepit body of the old African woman, and from her gasps and groans he feared that he had come too late to hear what she had to say.

Jack recognised the old woman as one whom he had frequently seen hobbling about the estate, and who had been pointed out to him by labourers and tenants as an Obeah woman, and unmitigated vampire.

In the old days of slavery, every plantation in the West Indies possessed one or two Africans, male or female, who enjoyed an unenviable reputation for working "Obeah," the West Indian term for witchcraft. These people were popularly supposed by the credulous blacks to be in league with his Satanic Majesty and to have wondrous mysterious powers not vouchsafed to the majority of mortals. The Obeah men and

women obtained an extraordinary influence over their neighbours, through an intimate knowledge of the poisonous plants which grow in every tropical forest, and the frequent fatal uses they made of their knowledge. Sixty or seventy years ago, the slaves on an estate would sometimes be mysteriously decimated by the machinations of these wretches. The poisons which they used worked in a manner so gradual, and their effects were so different from those known to medical science, that crimes of this sort were very rarely brought home to the sorcerers, and they frequently practised their fatal proceedings for years before the planter was even aware that such miscreants lived on the estate.

There was, however, a less deadly branch to their business, and one which, while being less risky, brought them considerable profits. This was the preparation and sale of love-spells, medicines and charms, and even at the present day the credulous negroes frequently stint themselves of necessaries and save all they can put away, in order to be able to pay the exorbitant price of some spell, charm or potion, with which they

firmly believe that the Obeah woman can supply them.

This particular old sorceress, Quamina, was popularly supposed to be very nearly a hundred years old, and she had imbued her coloured neighbours with great respect and fear for her mysterious powers. Jack, on looking at her now, could hardly believe that she was even human. The shrunken old frame appeared to be almost void of flesh, and was covered with black wrinkled skin that looked quite unearthly. She seemed the personification of age and decay, her shrivelled black arms and hands looked like the bones of a skeleton dyed black, while her wizened knotted face, sunken jaws, and almost sightless eyes reminded him of a badly preserved mummy.

Jack had looked with pity and wonder at the unfortunate old creature for some instants, when he noticed that she seemed to be trying to muster up all her ebbing strength in order to say something. After several groans and gasps, every one of which Jack thought would be her last, the old woman finally managed to point feebly towards a bottle which was standing in a

corner of the hut. The little black girl jumped up from her crouching position at the foot of the mattress and handed it to Jack. Smelling it, he found it was rum, and thinking it might possibly do the old woman good, he poured out a little in a cup and put it to her lips. After swallowing a few drops the old creature seemed to revive, and putting out her shrivelled hand, as if to make sure that Jack was there, in a voice that seemed strangely inhuman and almost unearthly in the oppressive silence, she asked:

"Massa, is you dere? Is it really young Massa Jack Moresby dat I'se talking to?"

Jack, having assured her of his identity, the old witch took a few more drops of the spirit and seemed to revive considerably. She then motioned to the little black girl to go outside, and begged Jack to see that she did so. Having satisfied himself on this score, Jack returned to the old creature's bedside and asked her gently why she had sent for him.

"Massa," began the old woman, "I going to die soon, but I very glad dat I been able to see you and tell you 'bout something dat is lying 'pon my mind, an' I

hope I do get strength 'nough to tell you all before I die."

"All right, Quamina," interrupted Jack, "don't waste your strength in details, but tell me what you have to say in as few words as possible, because I see that you are very weak indeed. Would you like to see the doctor, Quamina?" he added quickly, thinking that possibly something might be done to ease the poor creature's last moments.

"No, no! Massa, let me be; I feel dat my time is come. I be very old, and no doctor can do me any good; besides," she added with an expression of contempt, "my bush medicine be better past all your white doctor's stuff—No, give me little drop more rum, and I fit to tell you all what I want to say, den I go die a lily bit easier.

"Massa Jack, I be plenty old, and I 'member well your fader, your gran'fader, and he fader before him. Dey bring me from Guinea in a slave ship when I been quite young girl, and I been slave 'pon dis estate for more'n forty year before emancipation come. When I was young, I was fine strong plump gals, though now I be so

old, you think it hard to b'lieve. Well, Massa Jack, your gran'fader no be good man, and he treat me bad—bad. He treat me all same like brute beast when he get tired of me, but," and even now a vengeful gleam shot from the sunken eyes of the dying woman, "he tink I be all same like other poor black girl. He nebber know dat my mammy in Guinea was plenty strong fetish woman, and dat she teach me how to work Obeah, even when I was quite small. I tell old Moresby" continued the old witch, "plenty times, dat if he treat me so bad, I would make it black for him. But he no care, and one day he flog me 'most to death in de mill-yard, befo' all de estate niggers. Dat night, he take sick, Massa Jack, and ebery day he get wuss and more weak, till just nine days after he flog me, dere was big, big funeral at Palm Vale, and dey bury de old planter under de oleander bushes near de great house!"

The old creature's strength seemed to be going fast, and Jack could hardly repress a feeling of loathing for the old wretch who related so unrepentingly how she had murdered his grandfather. Amidst her

gasps and groans, which were painful to hear, the old Obeah woman managed to let Jack know that she had still more to say, and after again swallowing a few drops of rum, she rallied a little and continued her confession.

"It be too late now to think of hanging me, Massa Jack; in half an hour I going back to Guinea, and you can throw my old body wherever you like. But, Mr. Moresby, p'raps you no going to b'lieve me, but I must tell you dat although it be now more than seventy years ago since I give your gran'fader de bush medicine what take him to his grave, I 'member it all as well as if it been yesterday, and now I think I be plenty sad and sorry for what I did, and 'specially as your fader and youself, Massa Jack, been often plenty good to old Quamina. You nebber ask her for rent for dis little house, and three times when I been sick, your fader sent me wine and good food from de great house, and now I no forget all that.

"Massa Jack," continued old Quamina huskily, as she tried to look round the little room, "you sure dat little girl is gone, and dat no one is listenin'?—cos I

going to tell you big secret." On having received the required assurance, she continued—

"De niggers 'bout here tell me, Massa Moresby, dat you is getting very poor and dat you done lost all you money. Dey say dat you owe plenty money to de lawyers, and dat dey is going to turn you out of Palm Vale. I plenty sorry to hear all dat, because I tink you be good young Massa, and dat you no be too hard 'pon de poor niggers. Now, if you listen well to what I going to say, you be going to get plenty money, and den you can pay de lawyers and save de estate."

Here old Quamina was suddenly taken with such violent spasms, and her gasps for breath were so distressing, that it looked as if the old witch would expire before she could disclose her secret.

Jack was getting interested, and after placing the old creature in a more comfortable position, he thought he might risk giving her another small dose of spirits. The poor old thing seemed to be at her last gasp, but after one or two mouthfuls of the rum, Jack was delighted to see her revive

considerably, and a minute or two later the old woman was able to continue her story, and unfold to Jack's wondering ears the following strange tale.

Old Quamina was popularly believed to be over a hundred years old, and although she had lost all count of her real age, even if she had ever known it, she certainly remembered quite clearly the days when the Caribbean seas were infested by slavers, pirates, and buccaneers. She could remember well the tremendous excitement in the country districts of Grenadilla, when it was reported that a suspicious-looking craft had been noticed hovering about the coast in a mysterious manner. She could recall to mind how the sturdy planters of old would arm the negroes and slaves whom they knew they could trust, and stood ready to repel any descent of ferocious buccaneers, while the planters' wives and daughters would speedily hide their money and jewels in stone jars and earthenware pots, which they buried near their houses, and which are even at the present day occasionally turned by the labourers' hoes or the estate ploughshares. Frequently, these descents

would be made by night, when the planters were ruthlessly murdered in their beds, and their wives, daughters, and valuables transferred to the blood-stained decks of the buccaneering schooner.

Jack, fearing that the old woman's strength would give way and be wasted in painfully relating these reminiscences, which he knew all about, urged her to come to the point of her story, and finally old Quamina related to him how about sixty or seventy years ago a Spanish pirate had made a descent on that part of the coast, and had landed a large number of men in the middle of the night. Their landing had been operated so quickly that the band of buccaneers had approached to within a hundred yards of the Palm Vale "great house" before the alarm was given. Jack's grandfather had had barely time to escape with his wife and family into the shelter of one of the cane-fields, before the house was surrounded and pillaged by the raiders.

That happened in the good old days when the Moresby of Palm Vale was known for his wealth and influence. The vast quantity of silver plate, which had been the

old planter's pride, was quickly transferred to the possession of the looting ruffians, and the eyes of the chief of the band were almost dazzled when, on breaking open one of the chests in the best bedroom, his greedy fingers closed on a casket of diamond ornaments and jewels which a duchess might, and probably would, have envied. Mrs. Moresby's diamonds had been heirlooms, and were the talk of the West Indies in their day. They, together with many other valuables, were quickly transferred to the buccaneer's vessel. It was not without great difficulty, however, that the corsairs were able to regain their craft, as their passage back to the shore was manfully contested by bands of armed slaves, who had, by this time, mustered in force. Most of the pirates were, however, able to get back to their vessel with the greater part of the booty. The anchor was raised, and the ship stood out to sea. When the day dawned there was not a sign of the craft to be seen, and were it not for the sacked aspect of Palm Vale mansion, and the complete disappearance of the valuables it contained, it was hard to believe that there

had really been any descent of pirates at all.

The sun rose clouded, however, and a few hours later a terrific hurricane broke over that part of the island. Houses were blown down, trees uprooted, and a great deal of damage was done. An hour or two after the hurricane had partially subsided, Quamina, who at that time was a young strong woman, was walking along the shore of a rather secluded little bay close to Palm Vale, when she suddenly came upon the body of a sailor, lying apparently dead, among a mass of broken wreckage. On looking closely at the man she found that, though frightfully injured, he was not quite dead. She dragged him up out of the waves, which were still washing over him, and after a good many struggles and groans on the man's part, she managed to half drag, half carry him to her little hut, which happened to be only a short distance away. The man remained unconscious for some time, and Quamina hardly expected, owing to the severity of his wounds, that he would recover. Thanks to her care, however, he gradually regained consciousness,

but the injuries he had sustained were so many and so complicated, that the unfortunate man never recovered the use of his legs, and remained an almost helpless cripple to the end of his days. As soon as he was able to speak a little he confessed to Quamina that he was one of the buccaneers who had taken part in the raid on Palm Vale. The pirate's vessel had succumbed to the fury of the hurricane, which broke out shortly after they had set sail; the craft had been driven back towards Grenadilla by the irresistible force of the storm, had struck on a reef, and in a few moments had been broken to pieces and sunk by the tremendous sea then running. By a miracle, this man had been washed ashore alive, and there was every reason to believe that he was the sole survivor of the fifty-eight men who had formed the schooner's crew.

The buccaneer implored Quamina not to surrender him to the authorities, and as the woman had taken rather a fancy to the unfortunate cripple, she not only protected and concealed him from the planters, who would undoubtedly have hanged him with

the greatest alacrity, but she attended to all his wants, and took as much care of the man as if he had been her father. It was comparatively easy for Quamina to keep his existence a secret from her neighbours, as she lived quite alone and apart from any one. Even at that time she had firmly established her reputation for Obeah and witchcraft, and was looked on by the other negroes with so much fear and awe, that no one would have dared to come prying into her concerns. Now and then there were rumours that strange voices and sounds had been heard at night issuing from the Obeah woman's hut, but it was generally accepted that this was only conclusive evidence of Quamina's dealings with the devil.

However, as time rolled on, it became generally known that the witch had a mysterious lodger, but as no one managed to find out how or when he came there, the fact gradually ceased to become a matter for wonder.

The buccaneer stayed some years under Quamina's roof, and having become well acquainted with her character, and the reputation she bore among her neighbours,

came to the conclusion that she would be a safe confidant, and he one day disclosed to her a project which he had been ruminating over for a long time. He had been one of the chief men among the pirate crew, and knew that the captain had accumulated a very large amount of treasure during the cruise. This treasure consisted principally of diamonds and of other very valuable jewels, which he always claimed as his share of the booty obtained from a raid, leaving the more bulky and varied plunder, such as money and plate, to the rest of the band. This captain, in fact, had had quite a mania for handsome jewels, and had been known even to buy diamonds or pearls with his share of plunder when the result of a raid consisted only of money or other valuables. Quamina's *protégé* knew that these jewels had been kept in a very strong wooden chest in the captain's cabin, and it was the grand project of recovering this chest and its contents that had occupied the pirate's mind ever since Quamina had saved him. For her part, the Obeah woman had not the slightest desire to own the jewels, as the idea of wealth possessed no attractions for

her unsophisticated mind. The man, however, worried her so frequently about it, that at last she consented to take him out in a canoe, to the spot near which the schooner had been wrecked. She was a strong, able-bodied woman, and with some little assistance from the crippled buccaneer, managed to paddle the canoe out to the reef on which the pirate had gone to pieces.

After a good deal of cruising backwards and forwards, they came to the spot where the wreck of the vessel could be clearly seen resting on the rocky bottom in about twenty feet of beautifully clear, transparent water. The buccaneer could hardly restrain his joy at seeing his prize within such easy reach, but this joy was turned to bitter sorrow at the thought that Quamina was no diver, and that, hopeless cripple as he was, it was entirely impossible for him to undertake such a feat as diving among the remains of the schooner.

He was sorrowfully obliged to admit that there was no alternative but to share the secret with some third person who would be a good swimmer and not afraid of going down among the sharks which could be seen

now and then swimming noiselessly in the vicinity of the wreck. The exact position of the reef was then noted, and the two curiously assorted confederates had to be satisfied with returning ashore after this purely preliminary view of the booty which the buccaneer had set his heart upon.

The confederate selected was a slave belonging to Palm Vale, a remarkably good swimmer and diver, and who was considered by Quamina to be a man who might safely be trusted with their secret. The preparations were finally completed, and one bright moonlight night the trio paddled out in a canoe to the spot where lay the remains of the pirate schooner. After several ineffectual dives the negro finally returned to the surface and delighted the crippled buccaneer by informing him that he had been able to peep into what had evidently once been the captain's cabin, and taking the hatchet which had been brought in the canoe, the negro dived down again to the scene of operations and worked steadily for some time, trying to break away a passage into the cabin. After five or six descents, however, the man returned to the surface with his face

expressing the liveliest terror. He firmly declined to return to his work, saying that while he had been engaged in chopping away the woodwork, a huge shark had come out from under the vessel's side and had made a savage dart at him. He had fortunately struck the monster on the snout with his axe, wounding him severely, but the slave refused stubbornly to go down below again that night, notwithstanding the ferocious threats of the buccaneer.

The next night, however, the man had regained his nerve and expressed his willingness to make another attempt. The three returned to the wreck, and after a great deal of talk, threats, and persuasions required to induce the negro to confront the sharks once more, the heavy wooden chest which the pirate had indicated, and which was fortunately not a very large one, was gradually moved out of the cabin and, by dint of tremendous exertions on the part of the two men and Quamina, was finally hauled up and deposited in the bottom of the canoe.

The work had been so long a job that by the time the chest had been hoisted into the

boat, the eastern sky was showing signs of the rising sun, and the confederates found themselves at a loss to know what was the best thing to do with the chest, now that they had got it. They did not like to bring it ashore at once, as it was waxing late and the buccaneer feared that they might be noticed with their prize by some of the slaves turning out to work, or, even more probably, by fishermen.

When she had arrived at this stage of her story, old Quamina had another very bad attack of spasms from which it seemed almost impossible that she could recover. Jack was intensely interested and excited by the old witch's narrative, and would have given nearly all the little he possessed to prolong her life for a sufficient time to enable her to conclude her story and disclose to him the whereabouts of this tempting treasure. Every moment he feared would be her last, but with marvellous tenacity of life, the old woman seemed to summon all her fast ebbing strength in one final effort, and to Jack's great relief, after a little more of the spirits, she was able to continue her story.

Considering it unwise to land their booty on the Palm Vale sea-shore, the buccaneer settled that they should paddle the canoe to a small island, on which stood the ruins of an old dismantled fort. This little island belonged to the Crown ; it was quite uninhabited, and none but fishermen, now and then, ever went there. Here, accordingly, the chest was landed, and as it resisted all their hurried efforts to open it, they decided to bury it in some place near the fort and to return later with the necessary tools. A spot was fixed on and the able-bodied negro was set to work at digging a hole of sufficient depth. After considerable exertions, owing to the absence of proper implements, a large irregular shaped hole was made. The negro having got into it, the buccaneer directed Quamina to help him to push the chest over the edge, so that the negro in the hole might receive it and deposit it properly. This was done ; the chest was laid in the bottom of the excavation, and as the black man was in the act of scrambling up to the surface, the crippled buccaneer dragged himself along right up to him with surprising speed, and like a

flash of lightning buried a long knife up to the handle in the heart of the unsuspecting negro. The horror and treachery of the act quite appalled Quamina, who nevertheless was not generally troubled with any excessively tender feelings; but the suddenness of the action and the atrociously-wicked appearance of the villain, whose life she had saved, had such an overpowering effect on her that silently and almost unconsciously she obeyed the orders of the murderer. The body of the negro had fallen back on to the chest, and the ruffian ordered her to help him to shovel the dirt and stones back into the hole. "He's got the whole lot to himself now," brutally observed the blackguard; "maybe it was a little hard on the nigger, but anyway he'll tell no tales now, I can swear."

Quamina had been completely cowed by the buccaneer, and she obeyed his commands like a slave. With some difficulty she managed to get the cripple back into the canoe, and finally returned with him to her hut. The ruffian had collected the necessary tools, and was preparing to return to the island for the purpose of opening the

chest, when he was suddenly seized with a fit, which in a few minutes ended fatally; whether the effect of the fit was assisted by any of Quamina's medicines, the old woman did not say, but she assured Jack that the whole business had revolted her so much that she had determined to leave matters as they were and to let the secret of the treasure die with her.

"But now, Massa Jack," continued the old woman in a very weak voice, "I 'member dat all de time I been living I do very little good and plenty bad things, and I tink dat if I tell you 'bout dis money and jewels, I may p'raps die lily bit easier. You been good young Massa to me and if you get back all your gransmoder's jewels, you may be able to pay back de lawyers and keep de estate. It be very very long time ago, to be sure, and p'raps someone else done find de chest already, but all de same, go and see, Massa Jack. We made de big. hole near de side of de fort, what turned towards a big silk-cotton tree, and an old rusty cannon lies quite close to it."

To say that Jack was astonished and excited by the old woman's story would be to

describe but faintly his feelings. He wondered what he could do to make the old creature's last moments a little more comfortable, as old Quamina was evidently in great pain. The flickering light in her sunken eyes was almost extinct, and life seemed to be ebbing away quickly. Jack noticed that her shrunken lips appeared to be trying to form words, and to his surprise the old woman found sufficient strength to bid him look in the corner of the thatch under the roof just over her head: "You will find an old tin, Massa Jack, wid something in it; I got no piccaninny, no broder nor sister, and if I no give it to you, de Governor go take it for himself, and I no want——" At this juncture the dying old woman seemed to yield up her little remaining strength. A quick short sigh ended in a slight spasm, and old Quamina's spirit went back to her fathers in Guinea.

To Jack it seemed like a dream, and it was some time before he could realise that there might possibly be some truth in the old creature's story. The dead silence was oppressive in the extreme. The faint

flickering flame of the little lamp shed such a dismal light on the wretched interior of the hut that Jack began to have quite an uncomfortable, eerie feeling. The walls of the miserable shanty were hung round with the mysterious implements and stock-in-trade of the dead witch. Small bottles full of some mysterious compounds, supposed to be sovereign charms against thieves and evil-doers, were lying ready to be handed over to some foolish negro in exchange for their weight in silver. In every corner was the most heterogeneous collection of rags, feathers, bones of cats, parrots' beaks, dogs' teeth, broken bottles, grave dirt, rum and egg-shells, all ingredients which went to form the fearful and wonderful mixtures which old Quamina had sold to her credulous neighbours in the guise of charms, potions, and love-spells.

Shaking off this uncomfortable feeling, Jack reverently covered up the remains of the dead Obeah woman with an old cloth, and then he remembered her last words with regard to what was hidden away under the thatch. He half expected it would turn out to be some rubbishing charm, such as

the bones of a rattlesnake's tail or some such nonsense, to which the negroes in Grenadilla attach the greatest value as amulets. Standing up on an old empty box, he searched about under the thatch in the corner indicated, and presently came upon the tin mentioned by Quamina.

It looked like one of the tins used for potting salmon, and was thickly covered with rust. On withdrawing the cover, however, Jack was intensely surprised and no less delighted on perceiving the contents. The old witch's trade had evidently been a profitable one, and the contents of the tin probably represented her earnings during a great number of years. The tin, on being emptied, was found to contain quite an important little pile of gold pieces, a good many silver coins, and a good-sized sheaf of colonial bank notes. On counting over his legacy, he was delighted to find that it amounted to a little over three hundred pounds in value. As may be imagined he was anything but dissatisfied with his luck. This little amount dropping so unexpectedly into his possession raised his spirits considerably, as the thought rushed through

his brain that, although quite insignificant compared with the mortgages on the estate, or even to the interest due thereon for a single year, still, the possession of the three hundred pounds might possibly enable him to tide over a few weeks more, and to his young sanguine mind that meant all sorts of possibilities and potentialities in the way of some stroke of luck turning up.

He hardly dared to think of the treasure about which old Quamina had told him. That seemed ever so much too good to be true, and he was almost afraid at that moment to contemplate the possibility of the chest being still hidden away on the island. The probabilities were very much in favour of some fisherman or wanderer having, long ere this, noticed the disturbance in the spot and the freshly turned earth, and that the chest and its contents had years ago been appropriated by some one who had wisely said naught to anyone in Grenadilla about his luck. Then, again, the contents of the chest may possibly have been worthless, and the diamonds and jewels which the buccaneer had assured Quamina that it contained

may very probably have been kept somewhere else, in some part of the ship unsuspected by the ruffians who composed the crew of the pirate's craft. Jack, however, felt there was plenty of time to think about all those details ; so depositing the old witch's legacy in his pocket, he opened the door and called out to the little black girl whom he had turned out of the hut. She, however, had evidently left the neighbourhood, and it was some time before Jack's shouts attracted some of the estate people, in whose charge he left the old Obeah woman's body and hut, giving them directions for the burial of the poor creature's remains.

Jack had no sooner remounted his pony and ridden a few yards on his way to the great house, when Sandy Sneat noiselessly emerged from his hiding-place, just behind old Quamina's hut. This worthy's ear had been stuck close to the rickety plank side of the shanty, and he had thus been enabled to hear a great part of the startling secret which the old woman had confided to Jack Moresby.

"Well, I'm blowed," forcibly ejaculated Mr. Sneat, after a long-drawn whistle, "I'm

darned if this ain't a rum go. Ha, ha, my young buck, it won't be my fault if I don't have a try for these same diamonds," he continued, as he walked meditatively away from the old woman's hut.

CHAPTER IV.

VERY different were Jack Moresby's feelings that evening from what they had been when he left Williamtown on his return journey. His young sanguine spirit was overflowing with excitement and anticipation. He had been so utterly cast down and dispirited by his failure in raising the money he half hoped to obtain from the banker, that old Quamina's wonderful story had caused his feelings to veer right round to the other extremity, and he once or twice caught himself calculating already what would be his first steps after coming across the magnificent fortune which seemed to be within such easy reach, and we may be sure that Violet Lee formed no unimportant part of these rather premature dreams and plans.

He felt inclined to rush off immediately to the indicated spot on the little island,

and thus relieve his anxiety at once as to whether the treasure were still there or not. His inner man, however, warned him that, notwithstanding all his excitement and the more cheerful aspect of his prospects, there was such a meal as dinner, the hour for which had long slipped by. He reflected, too, that he would be obliged to obtain assistance from some one, so concluded that the wisest plan would be to wait till next morning to know his fate, and at all events have the pleasure of passing the time, till then, in building castles in the air. These might, very probably, be never realised, but in any case there would be considerable pleasure in making them.

Jack remembered well hearing his father frequently talk, with pardonable pride, of the magnificent diamonds which his grandmother had possessed, and the story of the pirate's descent and raid on all the jewels and plate had been several times related to him. It seemed to him indeed wonderful to think that there might possibly be a chance of his regaining these old heirlooms of his family, which in themselves were worth a very large sum ; but Jack also could not

help thinking of the store of valuable jewels which the pirate had accumulated besides, and which would probably be found together with his grandmother's diamonds.

Coming up to the gate of the mansion, he threw the bridle of his pony to an old black groom, and walked up the steps leading to the verandah with such a feeling of confidence in his luck that even the old servant remarked that "Massa Jack look like he get good news, for true." He looked round at the old house with a feeling as if he were just entering into possession again, after a long absence, and as his eyes wandered over the cool marble-flagged verandah, the lofty rooms of noble proportions, and the bright well polished pine floors, it was inexpressibly delightful to him to think that perhaps, after all, he would not be obliged to give it up, and that the day might not be far distant when he and sweet Violet would roam hand in hand together through the dear old place, without a chance of its ever being taken away from them.

"Thomas, I suppose dinner is quite cold, eh?—tell them to send it up as it is, and let

some one go down to Mr. Bret at once and say that I would be glad to see him as soon as possible,"

"Yes, sah," answered the white-headed old butler, "dinner been ready for two hours past, sah, and it now nearly ten o'clock," almost grumbled the old fellow as he left the room to give the directions required.

Jack proceeded then to deposit old Quamina's legacy in a secure place, and returned to the dining-room. Notwithstanding his long fast, excitement had quite taken away his appetite, and he only toyed impatiently with his knife and fork, until he was informed that Mr. Bret had arrived.

"Show him in here, Thomas," said Jack, "and see that the doors are closed, and that no one listens outside."

The old black butler, who had been thirty years in the Moresby family, was no little surprised at Jack's directions, but was too well trained to make any show of his astonishment.

"Come in, Bret," said Jack as soon as he saw the young man. "Close the door, please, and come and sit down. I have a

long story to tell you, and one which I think will surprise you as much as it did me."

"I think, judging from your face, sir, that it must be good news," returned Bret, as he took the seat at the dining-table which Jack indicated to him.

"It's about the most marvellous yarn you ever heard, I think. It involves a wonderful secret, but I have made up my mind to share it with you, Bret, as I want your help, and I feel sure that I can have confidence in the honesty which I know you possess."

"Thank you, sir," quietly returned the young man. "I've known you ever since I was quite a youngster, and, as you know, sir, your father was very good to me, and I should be ungrateful, indeed, if I allowed myself to forget it."

"I believe you, Bret, and I am sure you're as true as steel," quickly answered Jack, and he forthwith confided to him the wonderful story which old Quamina had related on her death-bed.

Sam Bret was a fine stalwart young mulatto of about Jack's age. His hair was

a trifle woolly, perhaps, and his nose a little broad and thick, but he had such a magnificent pair of expressive black eyes, and a row of such dazzling white teeth, that he was a very fine type of the cross between the black and white races. His dark-brown face bore an expression of honesty and good temper which thoroughly justified the high opinion that Jack entertained of him. The young mulatto had never known his father, and his mother died while he was quite a little boy. Old Mr. Moresby seeing that the youngster promised to be bright and intelligent, had taken him under his protection, and after giving him a little schooling, had brought him up as an overseer on the estate. Sam became quite a pet of the old planter's, and showed by his hard work and desire to please that he remembered with gratitude what had been done for him. His life had been so much bound up with the Moresbys, that it pained him exceedingly to see how involved in debt they had become, and how probable it seemed that the fine old plantation would go out of the family.

When Jack had concluded his remarkable

story, the young overseer was as excited as his employer, but was not quite so sanguine about finding the treasure.

"Sixty years is a long time ago, sir, and I'm afraid that it is almost too much to hope that no one has come across it since it was buried there. However, there's no use in wondering about it; why not go now and make sure?"

"Now?" quickly returned Jack. "Yes, by Jove, why not? There's a good moon, and I confess I'm dying to know, one way or the other."

"I don't see why we shouldn't, sir," said Sam. "It's not very far off, and I'm sure we can get a canoe at the bay side, without being obliged to tell anyone where we are going to."

"All right then, Bret, just tell Thomas to have my pony and the grey saddled, and we'll be off at once. We'll pass on the way at the boiling-house, and get a couple of shovels which we shall probably require."

The two young men were tremendously excited at the idea of this adventure, even though it should turn out after all to be a failure, and they were very soon trotting

down on their way to the beach. It was a beautifully clear, moonlight night, and as it was nearly twelve, they did not meet many of the people about. Arrived at the beach, Sam hitched up the ponies under a tamarind tree, and proceeded to look about for a canoe which they might borrow without asking permission of its owner. Sam entirely agreed with Jack in thinking that it was absolutely necessary to keep the whole thing as quiet as possible. The treasure, should it really happen to be still in its hiding-place, was unfortunately deposited in land belonging to the Crown, and would undoubtedly come under the head of "treasure trove."

Now there are some very disagreeable laws in the West Indies with regard to "treasure trove," it being specially enacted in Grenadilla that all money, plate, or other valuables hidden away or buried in the earth must be delivered up to the authorities, and after a great many tantalising forms and preliminaries, the finder of the treasure may think himself fortunate if he be rewarded by a third of the amount, another third being appropriated by the Govern-

ment, while the remaining third goes to the owner of the land. It is, doubtless, owing to the tenor of these laws that one hears so seldom of hidden treasure being found in the West Indies, or elsewhere. There is no doubt that most of the West Indian Islands still contain a considerable amount of buried treasure, and it may be inferred from the fact of small lots of "Plugged Joes," doubloons and other old gold coins, being frequently put into the market in the lesser Antilles, that jars or pots containing a certain amount of these coins are still turned up now and then in the islands.

Deep holes and excavations may frequently be noticed in Grenadilla and in the neighbouring islands, and these have generally been made by people digging for hidden money.

The notorious Captain Kidd, the terror of the West Indian Islands in the eighteenth century, being pursued by a cruiser, was forced to run his ship ashore at Barbadoes, and a paper was found among his things, after his death, describing a spot in a small wood near Bridgetown where he had buried

an immense amount of treasure. For acres around the spot indicated the soil has been quite honeycombed by the excavations of treasure-seekers. Whether the booty has been secured or not, no one knows, as the finder would in all probability have been most careful to keep his success a secret, so as not to have to share with the Government and the owner of the land besides.

In Jack's case, however, this treasure was supposed to be on Crown land, so that the Government would be entitled to no less than two-thirds of the prize. It may possibly have been a wrong way of thinking, but it must be confessed that Jack Moresby refused to consider, for a single moment, the advisability of sharing with the Crown; the more so, as although he had, of course, no evidence to prove that part of the jewels had belonged to his grandmother, still he considered that he had every moral right to them, and that he would be an utter fool were he to say anything at all about his luck, provided that the treasure ever came into his possession.

In fact, it may be generally admitted

that this sinful world probably contains very few individuals in the full possession of their senses who, were they in Jack's place, would be animated by such a penetrating respect for the law as it stands, that they would gratuitously give up to the Crown two-thirds of the value of any buried treasure which they might be so fortunate as to fall upon.

However, let us return to our two young men. After a few minutes' search Sam came upon a small punt, which exactly suited their purpose. The painter was unfastened, the shovels put into the boat, and the two young fellows pulled with all their might towards the little island which lay about a mile from the shore, at the entrance of the bay which the old fort had formerly commanded.

The moon was shedding a beautiful silvery light over the clear waters of the bay, which was calm and placid as a lake, and the only sound that broke the stillness of the night was made by the measured plashing of the oars, or the sudden leap of a fish out of the water.

"Do you know the place, Bret?" asked

Jack, as he turned half round to see if they were going in the right direction.

"A little, sir," answered Sam; "I've been there once or twice, turning turtle, and remember the broken-down fort well. Can't say I noticed the fallen gun which old Quamina spoke of, though; however, I dare say it's there all right. We'd better make for that little beach to the left, sir; it'll be the easiest place to pull the boat up."

"By Jove, Bret," remarked Jack, "I can't realise a bit what we have come for; it seems so utterly improbable in these latter-end of the century days, and I'm almost afraid it's a wild-goose chase after all."

"We'll soon see now, sir," replied Sam, as he and Jack jumped out of the punt and hauled her up on the beach. Taking the shovels and a bit of rope with them, the two young men scrambled their way through the low, tangled bush towards the dismantled walls of the old fort, which shone clear and white in the moonlight.

"Stop," said Jack, suddenly, after they had been walking a few minutes, "we're forgetting all about the landmarks. Old

Quamina said it was near the side of the fort, turned towards a large silk-cotton tree."

"Blest if I see any silk-cotton tree, sir," rather dolefully remarked Sam. "It's sixty year ago, and it's been most likely blown down, or perhaps struck by lightning. However, the stump may perhaps be remaining, and that may be good enough."

Jack's spirits fell considerably at the thought that very possibly the landmarks which the old witch had indicated had disappeared years ago. If this were so, their only chance of coming across the treasure would lie in digging up the soil all round the fort, until they struck the right spot, and this, besides entailing a large amount of labour and expense, would certainly attract the attention and publicity which he was anxious to avoid.

"Look here, Bret," said he, presently, "you walk round the walls that way, while I start going round here, and if you come across the stump, halloo, and I'll come to you."

Had it not been for the hum of the countless insects which the tropic night

seems to call suddenly into existence, the stillness would have been almost oppressive. The twigs broken by Jack, as he advanced through the undergrowth, crackled and rustled under his feet, and the sudden whirr and mournful hoot of an owl, as it skimmed along just over his head, gave the young planter a cold shiver down his back, and he began to feel as if his adventure were part of a nightmare that would soon develop into all the horrors of flying leaps into bottomless chasms, or maddening flights from herds of antediluvian beasts.

The little crumbling fort, which, in the days of old, had commanded the entrance of the bay, was almost covered by a thick curtain of tangled "lianes" and creepers, while the four small bastions which composed it were gradually falling into misshapen ruins, showing breaches and undulations due to the noiseless and irresistible artillery of Old Father Time. Two or three old rusty guns, which had fallen away from the carriages that could no longer bear their weight, lay about in helpless disorder, covered with masses of clinging weeds, which seemed to be trying to smother away

from sight the ugly, murderous works of forgotten generations.

Two minutes, which to Jack seemed like twenty, had hardly elapsed when a cheery shout from Sam broke the silence of the night.

"Why, look here, Mr. Moresby," said he, excitedly, when Jack reached him, "I do believe this is the very silk-cotton tree," pointing to a large clump of tangled vines, which, on being pushed aside, showed the remains of the trunk of what had once been a very large tree.

Its curious shape and the rotten remains of the buttress-like roots showed that it had undoubtedly once been a very large silk-cotton tree, and sixty years ago, at the time of the burying of the treasure, it had probably been a magnificent landmark, spreading its gigantic limbs over half the surface of the little island.

The two young treasure-seekers were getting very excited, and the search seemed to be getting, like the old nursery game, hotter and hotter as they appeared to be getting nearer the hidden object.

"That's the tree, sir," said Sam almost

breathlessly; "no doubt about it. Now what's the next move?"

"Let me see," returned Jack, not a whit less excited, "old Quamina said exactly—'They made a big hole near the side of the fort, turned towards a big silk-cotton tree, and an old cannon lies quite close to it.' There's the tree; now for the gun."

Instantly the two young fellows set to hunting about feverishly all over the ground between the tree and the fort. An onlooker would have compared them to a couple of terriers looking for rats.

"This will never do, Bret," said Jack, out of breath, after a few minutes of futile search; "we must go to work methodically. The bush and weeds are so thick that we might waste hours looking for that gun, and miss finding it after all. You begin to walk in a straight line from here to the fort, and then come back again on a line about two feet further to the left, and I'll do the same thing on this side. Like that, it will be almost impossible to miss it."

Jack had hardly walked half-a-dozen yards on the beat which he had assigned to himself, when his foot suddenly struck a

hard substance which nearly caused him to measure his length among the dew-laden bushes.

"Here it is! Here's the very gun!" he called out, with difficulty repressing a hearty cheer.

"So it is, sir," joyfully acquiesced Sam, as he hurried up. "By Jove, this is splendid!" And the two young fellows raced for the shovels and began clearing away the bush and dirt around the cannon as if their very lives depended upon their haste.

It was no easy job, and both young men perspired freely and felt pretty well exhausted by the time the thick undergrowth had been all rooted up. They dug away rapidly and almost too excited to speak for a few minutes, wondering whether they had really struck on the right place.

"Is it there, or has it been found already and carried away?" were the unspoken thoughts of both. Fortune followed them, for, when a hole about three feet deep had been made, Jack's spade struck something which did not seem to be either stone or earth, and, with a startled exclamation, he

held up what seemed to be a thigh-bone for Sam's inspection.

"The skeleton of the murdered slave," they ejaculated simultaneously; and the discovery caused them for a moment to throw down their shovels and look at each other in silence.

They had forgotten all about the tragedy which had taken place there sixty years before, and to Jack the whole ghastly scene rose up before his eyes with horrid vividness. He felt as if he had been present at the terrible episode. The old fort was the same; the rusty cannon was lying there exactly as it had lain at the time when Quamina had marked it. The same weird moonlight shone over the scene, and there was the open hole which had received the chest.

He seemed to see the ill-assorted trio—the witch crouching on the ground, and looking on with apathetic eyes—the unfortunate black trying to scramble out of the hole, and the horrible cripple crawling up like a snake and burying his long glittering knife in the heart of his victim.

These gruesome thoughts were however

quickly dispelled by Sam, who was not troubled by any such romantic ideas, and who set to work with redoubled ardour to clear away the earth. His excitement was whetted by the discovery of the skeleton, which gave good promise of the treasure being still there and undisturbed. Indeed, Jack had to remonstrate with him on the unceremonious, not to say irreverent, way he chucked the bones aside as his shovel turned them up.

Jack's excitement and hopes were also redoubled, and, after a few more minutes' digging among the earth and bones, he was inexpressibly delighted to hear his shovel strike against a hard mass, which was undoubtedly the chest they were seeking. Throwing aside their shovels, and going down on their hands and knees, they speedily cleared away the remaining dirt, and gradually the upper part of a wooden chest lay revealed to their delighted eyes. It was not a very large one, but put together so securely, and made of such hard durable wood, that it had resisted very fairly the effects of its long sojourn underground. It was moreover bound round

and protected by huge clamps of iron and solid hinges, after the fashion of the chests and trunks of the eighteenth century.

Although of considerable weight, the two young men had it out of the hole in a trice, and their hopes beat high with regard to what it probably contained when they noticed the multiplicity of strange locks and bolts by which it was secured. Still, there was an exciting uncertainty about its contents, and Jack decided that although the chest was of considerable bulk, they had better get it into the boat and carry it up to the house as best they could, rather than break it open there with only the rough tools they had with them.

After a considerable amount of trouble and hard work, the two young men returned with their prize as noiselessly as they could to the mansion, having had the good fortune to find the road between it and the beach quite deserted. They also managed to carry the chest right into Jack's bedroom without attracting the notice of any of the servants, who had all evidently gone to bed. The groom was then called up and told to see to the two

ponies which had been left hitched to a tree a little way from the gate, and, after a few minutes spent in making sure that all was quiet, Jack and Sam betook themselves to the exciting task of opening the chest.

Moresby's anxiety was intense. His whole future depended on the contents of that wooden coffer. If, as he fondly hoped, it would be found to contain the splendid wealth of jewels which the old witch had spoken of, he was saved. The mortgages should be paid off to the uttermost farthing; Palm Vale would be his without fear of its ever being taken from him, and sweet Violet would share it with him. If, on the contrary, it turned out after all to be empty, or full of valueless rubbish? But this eventuality, however, he refused to consider for a single moment.

A couple of hatchets, a hammer, and some chisels were quickly procured, and Jack and the young mulatto set to work to open the case. It was very securely closed, and the damp and rust, caused by its long sojourn underground, had very much swollen the wood. The two young men

worked for some minutes before the lid gave signs of yielding to their efforts. However, after a few additional well-directed blows, the old wooden coffer finally gave way, and, almost breathless with excitement, Jack and Sam peered into it. An "Oh!" heavy with disappointment escaped their lips.

"Isn't there anything, sir?" breathlessly asked Sam, as Jack put his hand into the deep open chest.

At the bottom of the coffer lay a quantity of old rotten matter, which smelt atrociously. It was impossible to guess whether it had originally been composed of paper, or stuffs, or other substance; but while rummaging among this decayed rubbish, Jack's hand suddenly came into contact with something hard, and, unable to restrain a whoop of delight, he pointed excitedly to something lying at the bottom of the chest.

It appeared to be an iron casket of remarkable strength.

Jack almost danced about with delight, but became more subdued when Sam remarked that the noise he was making might

possibly attract the notice of some of the servants. The casket was of considerable weight considering its size, and on examination appeared to be a miracle of strength. The rust was so thick on it though, that it was difficult to distinguish either lock or hinges. The question then arose as to how it was to be opened. Several hard blows struck at it seemed not to have the slightest effect, and Jack began to fear that the opening would have to be put off until the morrow, when the necessary tools could be obtained.

The two young men were turning over the casket and carefully examining its outside, when suddenly the deep tones of a large bell, violently rung, broke the stillness of the night.

"Good heavens, Sam! What is that?" cried Jack, as both young men rushed to the windows.

"Fire, sir, fire! So help me ——" cried Sam. "Good God, sir, it's the nine-acre patch the other side of the river!" he continued hurriedly, as he rushed to the door and bolted out of the house.

A thrill of horror ran through Jack's

frame as he saw the glare of the flames, which roared and leaped in gigantic forked tongues out of the large field of dry sugar canes.

A fire in the canes is a disaster for most planters; but to Jack, with his struggling mortgaged estate, it meant a terrible loss. In a few seconds the air was full of the shouts of the estate people, who were hurrying down from all directions to assist in trying to put out the fire.

"Fire, sir, fire in the canes!" called out one of the servants, rapping loudly at the door.

"All right, Thomas," answered Jack, "bring the pony round as quickly as possible; I'll be out in a minute."

Quickly replacing the iron casket into the old chest and throwing a blanket over all, Jack hurried out of the room, taking care to double lock the door behind him. Then he galloped off as quickly as his pony could carry him to the scene of the disaster.

The stillness of the night was broken by the dreadful clangour of the estate bell as it rang out the fire alarm.

The sky was red and the lurid glow of the flames paled the light of the waning moon. Huge clouds of smoke were rolling upwards, and the crackle of the ripe sugar-canes, as they burst in the fire, resembled the discharge of musketry. The air was full of the shouts of the excited negroes who were rushing around like demons, and the whole scene was intensely weird and unearthly.

No one appeared to know how or where the fire had broken out, and it seemed, owing to the strong westerly wind which had sprung up, that there would be great difficulty in arresting the progress of the flames.

Jack and Sam were soon in the thick of it, directing the efforts of the gangs of negroes who were doing their best to circumscribe the ravages of the fire by cutting broad tracks through the canes, some distance ahead of the flames.

The excitement and heat were intense. The sugar-canes themselves did not burn much, but the mass of dried leaves and straw which surrounded their stumps seemed to attract the fire, and the smallest spark

sufficed to set the whole thing in a roaring blaze. Broad tracks had been cut right through the field about fifty yards ahead of the flames, and when the fire reached this boundary, it seemed as if it would spend itself and be satisfied with the damage already done. But, just as the exhausted negroes were beginning to think their labours ended, a sudden gust of wind would spring up and fan the dying flames into roaring activity. Forked tongues of fire would shoot up into the clouds of smoke and then bend over the broad track as if to kiss the scorched canes on the opposite side, and the work was all to be recommenced fifty yards farther on.

However, after two or three hours of fearfully hard work and tremendous anxiety, Jack was intensely relieved to see the last dying embers of the fire stamped out under the hard soles of the negroes' feet, and then he began to think it was high time that he should take some well-earned rest after the immense amount of excitement he had gone through since the preceding day. The loss, nevertheless, was considerable. The whole of the nine-acre field had been completely

burnt out, and in order to save something out of the catastrophe Jack gave orders to the second overseer, a smart young Grenadillan, to have the burnt canes taken at once to the mill, and ground before they turned sour.

By the time Jack wended his way back to the house, the sun had risen and it was nearly nine o'clock. Although he felt so utterly worn out, he knew full well that sleep would be impossible for him until the precious casket had been opened, and his anxiety and excitement allayed in one way or another.

Thinking it would be ungenerous not to let Sam join in the pleasure of the surprise, whatever it was, considering he had had such a large share of the trouble, Jack ordered a man to go and tell Bret that he was wanted immediately at the great house.

Rushing up the steps, he quickly made his way towards his bed-room, unlocked the door, and went in.

On looking at the middle of the room, the unfortunate young fellow nearly fainted. His legs gave way under him and great

beads of cold sweat broke out over his brow.

The blanket which he had thrown over the chest had been tossed aside—the chest itself was there, but the casket was gone! The open window told its story.

CHAPTER V.

"GONE! — Gone!" almost inarticulately exclaimed Jack, as he sank heavily on to his bed, with his head on his hands. "Gone! No, good God—it can't be. It's a dream! It never was there! Impossible!" he continued incoherently, passing his hand quickly over his forehead, as if to chase away a horrid dream. "No, no! surely not. I can't have put it back into the chest. Perhaps I locked it up in the press," and rushing across the room he broke open the door of his wardrobe, too impatient to take the keys out of his pocket. "Not there! No—I remember, of course—I put it back among the rubbish," and feverishly rummaging among the rotten stuff in the chest, he finally turned it upside down on the floor.

"Good heavens! it's gone—really gone!" exclaimed the young fellow, dazed, as he

gradually realised the extent of his loss. "But who," he almost shouted "who?" "where is the blackguard who has taken it?" looking wildly out of the open window as if he half expected to see the thief.

For one moment, a suspicion against the honesty of his overseer flew through his brain. He was under the impression that Sam Bret was the only other man who knew of the existence of the treasure, and, for a few seconds, he believed that his trust had been taken advantage of, and that perhaps, while his attention had been engrossed in the struggle with the cane fire, Bret had treacherously sent up someone to the house and robbed him of the last chance of saving his estate.

One look, however, at Bret's honest face as the young fellow came into the room convinced Jack that his fleeting suspicion could not have maligned a more worthy soul, and when the young mulatto had, at a glance, become aware of the dreadful misfortune, his grief, rage, and disappointment were almost as deeply felt as Moresby's.

"What a fool I was," lamented Jack, "what a doubly distilled idiot to have

rushed away in such a hurry, instead of remaining here to guard the fortune which was already in my hands; what——"

"That is, if the casket really does contain a fortune, sir," interposed Sam, anxious to say something which might allay his employer's intense disappointment.

"Fortune! of course it did, man," roughly answered Jack, "do you think they would keep potatoes or rusty nails in an iron casket like that—absurd! I'm certain that its contents are worth thousands and thousands, and, oh curse my luck!" he continued, throwing himself back on the bed again in despair, "there it was already in my possession, I may say, and yet I left it to the mercy of everyone, simply to go and see a few wretched canes burning! What were a few acres of canes compared to what that chest contained? I'd rather the whole place had been burnt, than have lost the only chance of fortune that has ever come into my way." Then quickly starting up, as if he had made a sudden resolve—"But who is the thief, Bret? Who can have known about the chest?"

"Well, that's just what I was thinking

of, sir," answered Sam, who had been standing in the middle of the room, ruefully surveying the broken chest and the evil smelling rubbish lying all over the ground. "Someone must have watched us coming back with it, and suspected that the box held something valuable; could it have been any of the servants?"

"No, I don't think so," answered Jack, as he mentally reviewed them all in his own mind. The two or three house servants were all trusty negroes who had served his father for years, and he felt sure that none of them would have committed the theft. There were, however, two or three boys employed in the stables and garden who lived in the out-houses, and one of them might possibly be the culprit. Still the odds were against it, as they were all very simple unsophisticated blacks who might probably venture to steal some trifling articles, such as food or sweet things, but who would not dare to make away with such a thing as the iron casket, the contents of which were known to no one.

"No, Bret, I don't believe it is any of the servants," continued Jack. "Are you

sure we did not pass any one on the road down, who might have been watching us, wondering what we were doing out at such an hour?"

"I don't remember seeing any one, sir, and I'm sure I looked about carefully—I suppose, there couldn't have been any one on the little island who saw us unearth the chest?"

"I don't think there could have been," returned Jack, as he mechanically pulled his pipe out of his pocket, filled it, and drew two or three puffs in meditative silence. The smoke seemed to calm him wonderfully. and the first shock of disappointment over, he began to look at the matter more philosophically and wondered what chance there might be of recovering the stolen casket.

"It can't have been done very long ago, Mr. Moresby," Sam suggested hopefully, "and the blackguard is most likely not very far away."

"Can't be, Sam—at all events, supposing the man, whoever he is, came into this room immediately after I left it, that is not more than three hours ago, and he certainly can't

be very far by this time. By Jove!" continued Jack, vehemently, stamping his foot on the floor, "if the blackguard is in Grenadilla, I'll find him—if I have to spend weeks in the search."

"Well, sir, I think we had better set about it at once in case he leaves Grenadilla," answered Sam, who was all eagerness to begin the hunt.

"Certainly, we'll begin at once," and stepping out into the verandah, Jack called out lustily for one of the servants. He was all impatience to commence the search, and the servant not turning up at once, he swore rather roundly at the unfortunate native who at last appeared, rubbing his sleepy eyes. The whole household had been robbed of the greater part of their night's rest by the fire in the canes, and they were trying to make up for it now.

"Hurry up your stumps, you lazy nigger," exclaimed Jack, "and saddle the two ponies as quick as lightning. Get along now quick." The young planter could hardly contain his impatience, and excitedly paced up and down the verandah.

"Eh, eh!" muttered the black groom,

"what de matter wid Massa Jack, he seem in debbil of a hurry; what for he want de poor ponies again so soon? Dem poor beast work too hard dis night," the old negro grumbled to himself as he proceeded to get ready the two nags. Being an old servant and usually rather petted by Jack, he might, at any other time, have mildly protested to his young master against bringing out the ponies after they had been out all night, but he at once saw that this was an occasion when the slightest liberty would have been very speedily checked. "He called me lazy nigger," grumbled on the old black. "I no like dat; it not like Massa Jack to say ting like dat." This had evidently stuck in the old groom's throat, and his thoughts reverted to it several times as he was putting on the saddles and bridles. He was just tightening up the grey's girths when Jack's voice was again heard, in no measured accents, calling for the horses to be brought out at once.

"I hope Massa Jack no get into trouble," murmured the old fellow, as he led out the ponies, "but he seem mighty vexed dis morning."

"Come along, Bret," said Jack, throwing his leg across one of the nags, "you get on the grey, and I think you had better go round the nigger huts, and down by the river first, and see what you can find out. I'll go this way and meet you here in three quarters of an hour's time, and we'll compare notes. I only hope one of us will have some good news by that time."

"I'm sure I hope so, sir; I'll do my best," answered Sam as he cantered away down the hill in the direction of the mill-yard.

The anxiety, disappointment, and excitement had completely taken away all Jack's inclination for sleep or rest, although he had already gone through more marvellous adventures since the preceding afternoon than usually fall to the lot of many men during years. When he thought over his ride back from Williamtown, the old witch's wonderful story, and the still more wonderful discovery of the buried chest on the island, the fire in the canes, and the robbery of the casket, he could hardly believe that he had not lived a week since he had received the solicitor's letter.

The remembrance of old Quamina's secret

reminded him of her legacy. The excitement of the last twelve hours had been so great that the remembrance of the money had not had time to revert to him. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed, as he galloped back to the house, "suppose that's gone too!" The thought made his brain whirl for a moment, and springing off his horse, he dashed into the house again, rushing to his office to have his fears either confirmed or set at rest. Nothing seemed disturbed on his desk, and feverishly fumbling among his keys, he almost broke open the drawer in which he had deposited old Quamina's rusty salmon tin. "Thank God, that's all right!" he murmured almost breathlessly as he wrenched the lid off and saw the gold and notes lying intact. Hastily relocking the drawer, he reflected that even though the jewels might be irretrievably gone, there was still this nice little sum of over three hundred pounds safe and a reality.

There was no time to lose, though, if he wished to have a chance of catching the thief, so he was quickly in the saddle again and cantering away towards the houses of some of the tenants, who might possibly

give him some information relating to the theft.

His chance of success was very small, and nearly all the odds were in the thief's favour. In the excitement caused by the cane fire, it was highly probable that he had been able to escape unnoticed with his booty. The casket was not a very large one, and could easily be carried by one man.

All the questions which Jack put to the people he met were invariably answered in the same way. "No, sah, I nebber see no man passin' dis way wid a small iron box." He was rapidly getting discouraged, and began to fear that, owing to the utter absence of any clue to the thief, the treasure was irretrievably lost to him, and that the outside of the casket was all he was ever fated to see of it.

According to the custom in Grenadilla, every one appeared to have turned out to assist in putting out the fire, and in the hurry and rush, anybody so inclined might have got away with half the contents of Palm Vale house, with very little chance of being either stopped or questioned.

Jack was beginning to look upon the whole matter as an irremediable misfortune, when he was startled by the sound of a horse's footsteps clattering along the road behind him.

"Stop, sir, Mr. Moresby," shouted Sam, who was the rider in pursuit. "I'm on the track, sir, and we may perhaps catch the blackguard yet!"

"You don't mean it," exclaimed Jack, his spirits bubbling up at the gleam of hope. "Who is it, Sam, and where are they? There's no time to lose over it."

"No, sir, there isn't," replied Sam, as he led the way back towards the great house, "and I'm afraid he's got a long start. But let me tell you, sir; I was on my way down to the mill-yard, asking all the people I met whether they had seen anyone scooting away with a little iron chest, when I was stopped by Sally Sampson. You know her, sir—a tall black woman, who lives with her brother Josiah in the shingled house on the hillside."

"Yes, yes, but for Heaven's sake don't waste time in telling me these little details. Get on to the main point, man!"

"Well, yes, sir. I am getting on with it," returned Sam, rather hurt at Jack cutting him short so sharply. "Well, Mr. Moresby, as I was saying, this Sally Sampson stopped and asked me whether I had seen her brother at the fire, and if I knew where he was now. I told her I hadn't noticed him, as no more I had, and then she told me that he had left the house about an hour before the fire began, and what's more, that he had ridden away that little black pony of his, for Sally found the stable door open just now, and both nag and saddle gone."

"Yes, well, and after? But, upon my word, could it possibly be Josiah? I know he is supposed to be a rascal, but he has a little money, and I hardly think he would break into a house. Did you find out anything more, Bret?"

"Well, no, sir. I'm sorry to say no one could tell me where he was last seen, but I think we've got a clue now."

"It's certainly better than none," returned Jack, rather disappointed at its being such a vague one. "At all events, we can follow it up—for want of a better—

and try to find out what has become of Sneat."

The two young men then resumed their ride round the estate, and were turning to the high road to question everyone they should meet, when they saw one of Jack's tenants hurrying along the road ahead of them, and evidently in great haste.

"Well, what is the matter, Milton?" asked Jack as he caught the man up. "Where are you off to, in such a hurry?"

"I'm going to the police, sir. They've stolen my little horse, and I'm going to put the police on to the darned thief."

"They—they—who?" asked Jack impatiently. "Do you know the thief?"

"Yes, sir, it's that dirty 'red leg,' Sandy Sneat, who's got it. My brother saw him about four o'clock this morning, as he was coming down to the fire, riding hard on my pony on the road towards St. James, along with Josiah Sampson."

"What!" exclaimed Jack, greatly excited, "with Josiah—are you sure?" and turning to Sam, "that's the thief, that blackguard Sandy Sneat, of course. Now we are on the right track. By Jove, we

may get them yet. Milton, did your brother tell you that he noticed either of them carrying an iron box or anything like that?"

"No, Mr. Moresby," answered the man, "he didn't tell me; but have you lost anything, sir?"

"Lost anything! I should think so; but my good man, I beg of you to go and call your brother, now; he may tell us a good deal more about what I am trying to find out. You are sure to get your pony back, so don't worry about that. It's only been borrowed by those two rascals, and will be sure to turn up in a day or two. Hurry on now, my good fellow, for Heaven's sake, and call up your brother."

Jack and Sam followed close to the man's heels, and having found the brother, got the very information from him that they were seeking. The man acknowledged that, although he had not had time to take much notice, still, he was almost sure that Sneat appeared to be carrying across the saddle in front of him some heavy object which was wrapped up in a dark-coloured cloth.

The two young men were delighted. They were on the track, and nothing now remained but to set out in hot pursuit. Every moment was precious, as the thieves had got a long start, and it was impossible to know where they intended to carry their booty. Jack could do no more than gallop up to the house, scribble a short note to his second overseer, telling him to see after everything until he returned, and not knowing how far he might have to follow in pursuit, he filled one of his pockets with old Quamina's legacy. Five minutes later he and Sam were galloping along the road in the direction taken by the robbers. Almost every person they met was questioned as to whether he or she had passed a white and a black rider, one of them carrying a package on his saddle. Most of the answers were in the negative, and Jack began to fear that they were perhaps after all on the wrong track.

The road they had taken was the main line of communication between the western and eastern coasts of the island. It ascends gradually, until it crosses the ridge of high hills which traverses the whole length

of Grenadilla, and then descends gently towards the eastern sea-board. The road is a very beautiful one. It winds its way gradually up through smiling valleys and skirts the sides of fern-clad cliffs. Graceful tree ferns bend their lace-like fronds over it, and meet the feathery bamboos growing on the other side, forming a canopy of delicate texture, through which the rays of the sun are filtered with shaded light. Little rippling streams every now and then cross the path, and through the breaks in the trees glimpses of lovely landscapes delight the eye.

As may be imagined, our two young men had at that moment no eye for these beauties, and all their thoughts were centred on the chance of their being on the right track or not. The thieves had had almost four hours' start, and if they had really taken that road, had probably already reached Rougeville, the little town which was situated at the extremity of the mountain road, on the eastern shore.

Jack had made up his mind that the rascals would be met with at Rougeville, as Sam told him that Josiah had friends

and relations there, and was a native of the place.

His conjectures were correct, as when the young men had ridden about half way across the island, that is to say, about seven miles, a man was met who informed them that he had come across two men answering to the description given of the two confederates, about two hours before, at the entrance of Rougeville. He had not, however, noticed whether either of them carried a box or anything like it.

There was no doubt of their being on the right track, and Jack and Sam spurred on their jaded ponies to do their utmost to arrive at Rougeville as soon as possible.

"They can't have opened the casket yet, surely," remarked Jack, "and I do hope we shall regain possession of it before they have time to do so."

"I expect they will hide the contents of it, whatever they are, somewhere in Rougeville, sir," answered Sam, "and then come back quietly, and let things cool down for a little."

"Yes, that is if they think they are not suspected. Do you know where these

relations of Josiah's live, Bret? Those are the places we shall have to search."

"I know one or two of them, sir. One of them keeps a rum-shop, and he is a brother of Josiah's, and is supposed to be worth some money."

"So is Josiah, isn't he?" interposed Jack. "I would never have suspected that he would have run the risk of burglary."

"Oh, he's a dirty rascal, sir, and if he is worth a couple of hundreds, it's everything. He must have been put up to the stroke by Sneat."

"Eh; yes, yes, Bret, but how on earth did they find out about the treasure? Oh, I've got it," exclaimed Jack, striking his forehead, as if he had just received an inspiration, "of course that's it," and he related to Sam how he had met Sneat the preceding afternoon, in the avenue, just before Quamina's little messenger had stopped him. "He must have watched me, and by eaves-dropping have heard as much about it as I did. Of course that must be it."

"That's it, sir," acquiesced Sam; "he must have gone shares with Josiah, then

fired the canes, and under cover of the row, got into the house and made way with the little iron box."

And the two young men fell to anathematising their bad luck and carelessness, reproaching themselves bitterly for not having taken greater precautions.

All this was useless, however; and by dint of a large amount of urging and persuasion, they finally trotted their worn-out beasts into the little town of Rougeville. The young men were, needless to say, almost worn out with their exertions, and had tasted no food since the preceding evening, with the exception of a couple of rolls of bread which they had bought and eaten during their ride across the island.

Sam led the way at once to the rum-shop, kept by Josiah's brother, as being the most likely place to come across the thieves. This brother, however, was not to be found at first, but, by dint of much questioning and insistence, he finally appeared. He was a smug-faced, sanctimonious-looking, copper-coloured rascal, and protested with quite unnecessary warmth that he had seen neither his brother nor Sandy Sneat

for months. It was hopeless to expect information from him, but Jack was convinced that the two men were somewhere about the premises, or at all events had only just left them. On questioning some of the black children in the neighbourhood, Sam finally learnt that the two men whom they were in search of had undoubtedly arrived there some two or three hours before, and that one of them had carried a bulky package, wrapped in a black cloth, and which appeared to be very weighty. He also managed to find out that the pair had left the rum-shop after a few minutes, still carrying the same package, and that they had been last seen going in the direction of the sea-shore.

As it seemed quite hopeless to try to get more information, Jack and his overseer set off in the direction taken by the thieves. They had hardly gone a hundred yards down the street leading to the jetty, when they came across a policeman who was dragging along by the bridle a small bay pony.

"Why, that's Milton's nag, sir," cried Sam, after looking at it for a second or two.

"Here, constable, where are you going to with that horse?"

"I going to put him in de pound," grimly returned the sable myrmidon of the law. "He bin standin' here loose for de last tree hours, so I take um."

"Oh! there's no doubt about it, sir, it's Milton's pony, sure enough," continued Sam, as he carefully scrutinised the animal. "I recognise it by that cut over the fetlock, which kept him lame for weeks."

"Well, if that is so," returned Jack, "where is his rider, Sneat? He can't be very far off—or stop! I see it, of course he has turned the horse loose, to find its way back to its owner as best it can, and probably intends to remain quietly here in Rougeville for a little time, until the first alarm is over."

"It's my belief that they're going to get away by sea, to Trinidad or to the Spanish Main, Mr. Moresby," rejoined Sam impressively, "and I only hope they haven't started already."

Without another word, but both actuated by the same impulse, the two young men pushed on as quickly as possible to the

jetty which adorns the little port of Rougeville. A moment later their worst fears were confirmed.

To their profound disgust, they found that Josiah, who was well known in the place, had come down to the jetty, accompanied by a seedy-looking white man, who answered to the description of Sandy Sneat, and who was noticed to be carrying a small but heavy package. The pair had bargained with the skipper of a sloop which happened to be just leaving for a passage to Trinidad, and they had sailed away in her not more than two hours before. In fact, a black fellow who was loafing about the jetty assured Jack that the sloop's sails had only just faded away on the horizon.

CHAPTER VI.

"WHAT cursed luck, sir!" said Sam, despondently, on hearing this crushing information. "It's gone now, Mr. Moresby, for good, I'm afraid—infernally hard luck!" and the young fellow was beginning to work off some of his overwrought feelings by a string of West Indian bad language, when he was suddenly interrupted by Jack, who had evidently just made up his mind about something.

"No, Bret," said the young planter firmly, with a set expression of resolve on his lips. "No, I wont give up yet—I'll track the blackguards to Trinidad, and I won't leave a stone unturned until they are irretrievably beyond my reach. Then turning to some of the sailors who were lounging about on the jetty: "Here, can any of you boys tell me if there is another sloop going to start to-day for Trinidad?"

There were three or four small craft lying alongside the quay, apparently waiting for cargo, and it happened that one of them, a sloop of ten or twelve tons burthen, was expected to be ready to start for Trinidad in two or three hours' time. The skipper was sent for, and after a few minutes of anxious expectation, the man appeared.

A curious old figure, apparently about sixty years of age, with a face as black as the ace of spades, and fringed round by a white beard of stiff twisted wool, of which he was evidently very proud, as he incessantly pulled and tugged at it. His nether man, however, was incomplete, one of his legs being wanting. This was supplemented, when on shore, by a very rustic pair of crutches, but once on board his little sloop, these adjuncts were speedily flung aside, and old Captain Bobble would skip about his deck, despite his solitary leg, as nimbly as any other man.

"Start now—now?" he replied in answer to Jack's hurried proposal. "No, my genelman, I don't tink I can do dat; dere be plenty cargo to come aboard yet, and I got to wait fur it."

"Look here, my man," returned Jack impatiently, "if I give you £10 for the trip to Trinidad, will you be ready to go in ten minutes? If you get into Port of Spain before the *Bright Star*, which left this morning, it will be £20."

There was no need for another word.

The old one-legged skipper had no sooner understood Jack's offer, than he hopped along the jetty towards his sloop at a wonderful rate, and began to vociferate orders to his crew with a vehemence that left no doubt of his readiness to pocket the £20.

"In ten minutes, sah, we h'ist anchor," he yelled out to Jack, who was delighted to think that there was still a chance of overtaking Sandy and his confederate.

"Come along, Bret, let us see about getting some provisions aboard for the journey and hire someone to take back the ponies to Palm Vale. But stop—perhaps I'm taking too much for granted. I have not asked if you are willing to take the trip. Heaven alone knows where it will land us, and perhaps you may not care to risk it."

"Risk it, sir," returned Sam in a tone

which showed he was pained by Jack's want of confidence in him. "Why, Mr. Moresby, sir, I'll go anywhere for you, and you know it too, sir."

"Of course I do, Bret," returned Jack warmly, giving the stalwart young mulatto a clap on the shoulder which made his nut-brown face glow with pleasure. "I know your worth, Sam, and I would trust you with anything. If ever we do get hold of this slippery casket and find that it does contain the fortune I expect, I assure you that you will not be forgotten."

The two young men speedily made their purchases and preparations, and in a very few minutes were on the deck of the sloop, anxiously awaiting the skipper's order to cast off. A quarter of an hour later they were safely piloted through the narrow passage in the dangerous reef, which acts as a breakwater to the snug little port of Rougeville, and were standing out for the open sea.

The *Flying Fish* was a fine, taut, if rather dirty little craft, and Jack was delighted to see her broad mainsail bellying out under the impulse of a favourable breeze. The

day was a magnificent one, and the little sloop cut her way through the blue water at a splendid pace, leaving a snowy white track behind her that glistened in the midday sun. Jack strained his eyes for hours in scanning the horizon for a sight of the distant sails of the sloop that he hoped to overtake, but, as he well knew, a stern chase is a long one, and with such a ripping breeze as was then blowing, the two hours' start which the *Bright Star* had got was a tremendous handicap.

Hour after hour passed away, but although the little craft was speeding along at a glorious pace, she did not seem, nevertheless, to gain much on the object of her pursuit, the broad horizon ahead remaining perfectly clear of the smallest speck which could be taken for a sail. Once or twice, indeed, Jack's impatience caused him to make some deprecating remarks about the boasted speed of the *Flying Fish.* These appeared to cut the skipper to the heart, but the one-legged old negro, however, would merely answer them with a grunt of sorrowful disdain, and, in his uncouth patois, would order the two men who formed

his crew to haul tighter the halyards and clap on as much sail as the little sloop could carry.

As the day slipped slowly on, Jack's thoughts many a time reverted to his broken love passage of the previous afternoon. Deep were the anathemas which he heaped on the offending head of Mr. Smith, and often did he wonder what would have been Violet's answer to his interrupted pleading.

Violet's home was a sugar plantation about two miles farther inland than Palm Vale, and there she was spending a by no means happy life in the company of her mother and an invalid sister. Mrs. Lee was the widow of a late Chief Justice of the island, who had died, leaving her, as all thought, well provided in the possession of a large and fairly thriving plantation. A few weeks after his death, however, "Belvoir," as the place was called, was found to be in almost as hopeless a condition as we have seen "Palm Vale" to be. The Judge had been swindled and cheated in every way by dishonest managers and thieving overseers, and too lazy to look closely even into his own affairs, had died in the happy

assurance that he was leaving ample provision for his wife and family.

Mrs. Lee was a weak-minded, thoughtless woman in delicate health, and when the true state of her affairs was made known to her, had not appeared to realise the gravity of her situation. Accustomed, as the wife of the Chief Justice, to yield the *pas* only to the Governor's lady, she was looked upon as the leader of local society, and her whole mind seemed to be wrapped up in the rather petty social affairs of the island. Time after time her man of business would attempt to make her understand the precariousness of her position, advising her to curtail her establishment and reduce the expenses of her household. But it was a hopeless task. "Oh, my dear Mr. Peters," she would languidly say, "I really cannot understand all those worrying business matters. I leave it all in your hands, and I feel sure you will manage all for the best."

And so it went on. So long as Mrs. Lee obtained whatever money she required for current expenses, little she seemed to worry herself about the future, and the number of

carriages and horses in the stables at "Belvoir" remained the same as in the lifetime of the Chief Justice. Of her two daughters, the eldest had been a cripple from her youth up, and was an almost constant invalid. The poor girl's temper had become soured and irritable under her sufferings, and she was a great trial to her surroundings.

Violet had seen very little of her mother, having been taken charge of by an old aunt in England ever since she was quite a little girl. In fact, during her girlhood at school she had only seen her mother once for a few weeks some years back, when Mrs. Lee and the Chief Justice had taken a trip home. Violet had, accordingly, come to look on her aunt quite in the light of a mother, and had loved her very dearly. The old lady, who was fairly well off, had, however, been carried away by heart disease, and had expired with terrible suddenness. After her death it was discovered that, with almost unpardonable imprudence, she had put off making her will until it was too late. Her money went to other relations, and Violet was penniless. There was, accordingly, nothing left for her save to return to her

mother at Grenadilla, and when the poor girl arrived at Belvoir three months before the opening of this story, she was painfully conscious of how much she was a stranger in her own home. Her mother was very kind, and even affectionate in a mild degree, but Violet quickly perceived that all her mother's thoughts and love were centred on her crippled daughter, who, on her part, seemed to have taken a positive dislike to her newly-found sister.

Mrs. Lee, however, was surprised to see what rare beauty Violet possessed, and could hardly realise that the gawky boarding-school miss, whom she had seen a few years before in England, could in so brief a period have been moulded into the handsome, self-possessed and stylish girl who had presented herself so suddenly as her own daughter. She was delighted, too, to notice how all the bachelors of the island flocked to "Belvoir" on the slightest invitation, and Mrs. Lee speedily built all sorts of castles in the air on the strength of some wealthy son-in-law who would relieve her of all money troubles for the rest of her life.

Unfortunately, Violet, with what Mrs. Lee

wrathfully styled "undutiful perversity," persisted in giving no encouragement at all to the two or three wealthy planters who would have fulfilled most satisfactorily all Mrs. Lee's requirements, and she treated the attentions of these well-meaning but rather agricultural swains with such cool well-bred courtesy that her bucolic admirers always left Belvoir with the humiliating consciousness that they had not advanced a single step further into Violet's good graces. Furthermore, as if she were trying to do her best to run counter to her mother's wishes and hopes, Violet, with that spirit of contradiction which actuates most young girls who possess ideas of their own, resolutely refused to have anything to say to the rather middle-aged beaux whose praises Mrs. Lee was never tired of singing, and who would probably have made very satisfactory husbands in every way.

To Mrs. Lee's intense disgust, as soon as Jack Moresby appeared on the scene, Violet began to show a decided preference for his attentions, and, indeed, somehow or other, notwithstanding all Mrs. Lee's precautions and manœuvrings, they seemed always to

be partners in every set of tennis, always dancing together at every hop given in the place, and, indeed, showing such evident pleasure in each other's society as boded ill to Mrs. Lee's plans for Violet's settlement in life with a more eligible *parti*, whose advent on the scene was now becoming an absolute necessity.

More than once Mrs. Lee lost her temper over it, and even went so far as to say that Violet's evident appreciation of Jack's attentions was quite unseemly, an accusation which made Violet's cheeks tingle with rather unfilial thoughts, and confirmed her resolution to resist her mother's plans for her settlement in life.

"I can't think how on earth you can encourage the young fellow, Violet," Mrs. Lee would say, "knowing full well that he has not a penny to bless himself with, and that before two or three months are over his head, he will most likely be turned out of house and home by his creditors," and then, with a spice of malice, "I daresay he is only flirting with you, and means nothing at all. Indeed, I think it impertinent on his part to persist in dangling after you in

this way, knowing as he does that the idea of marrying is preposterous, considering his position, and I am very sure that if your father had been alive, he would not have dared to do it;" and so on, in every key and tone, Mrs. Lee would worry poor Violet. She never wearied of the theme, and from Jack's imperfections and unsuitableness as a son-in-law, the good lady would turn to singing the praises of some uncouth planter, who seemed to her to fill all the requirements which she would like to find in a son-in-law.

"There is Mr. Campbell, Violet, owns a splendid estate, making I don't know how many bags of cocoa—he would be a capital match for you, and, in fact, he spoke to me in such terms as to leave no doubt about his sentiments."

"I think it is very impertinent of Mr. Campbell to make any such remarks about me, mamma," interrupted Violet, "and I beg that you will keep them all to yourself and not repeat them to me, which I suppose he hoped you would do."

Then the argument repeated four or five times a day would generally conclude by

Mrs. Lee whimpering in a very aggravating manner, and declaring that Violet was a most undutiful daughter, who did not care in the slightest what became of her mother and her poor invalid sister.

It will thus be seen that Violet's life was not a pleasant one, and anxiously did she look forward every day to the hour when the sun's rays diminished their ardour, so that she might forget for a while, in the delight of a sharp canter, her mother's worrying importunities and her sister's unkind remarks.

CHAPTER VII.

Gradually the afternoon wore on, and slowly the flaming sun descended towards the horizon. The broad uninterrupted expanse of dark blue sea gently heaved in unbroken rollers under the soft warm breeze that blew so favourably. The creak of the ropes, and the occasional flap of one of the sails, alone broke the solemn restful silence which reigned over the scene.

It was a magnificent sunset. Such a one, indeed, as can only be seen in those distant isles of the Caribbean seas. The glorious orb of day, its daily duty done, sank gradually and majestically into the far distance. The sky became a resplendent expanse of brilliant colour, where every tint could be admired, from the palest sea-green to the gorgeous crimson of the clouds nearest the setting orb. Gradually and gently, but far too soon, a curtain of transparent azure stole over the

heavens, the gorgeous colours began to pale and fade, the bright streaks of gold and purple turned to the tints of a wood-dove's breast, and the brilliant space which a moment ago was a fiery mass of crimson light, was now a soft deep restful blue, from out the depths of which bright jewelled stars twinkled softly, and the day was done!

The skipper had promised Jack that, provided the favourable breeze held on, the sloop would arrive at Trinidad early the next morning. All through that night the wind held up, and Jack began to hope that they might reach Port of Spain, their destination, only a very short time after the craft which carried the robbers of the casket. Although their excitement was still very great, it may be believed that it did not prevent these two young fellows from sleeping like tops, though their dreams were full of wonderful searches after fabulous treasures, and marvellous escapes from murderous demons who guarded them. The rest and repose were, indeed, well needed, for the excitement and anxiety of the previous twenty-four hours had almost worn

them out, strong healthy young fellows though they were. A few moments after dawn, however, they were ruthlessly awakened by the one-legged skipper, who mutely pointed with a long bony black finger to a white sail about six miles ahead of them.

"The *Bright Star!*" both young fellows simultaneously exclaimed in delight.

"Twenty pound," laconically answered the old skipper, significantly slapping his trousers-pocket,—"twenty pound," he repeated, as he skipped away forward, helping himself on by the rigging like a huge orang-outang.

"By Jove, Bret! he means that we shall catch her up and land before her—hoorah!" and Jack almost executed a war dance in his delight.

"That pickled-looking blackguard Sneat," observed Sam elegantly, "little thinks that we're so close on his track. Won't I take it out of him just for all the trouble he's given us, when I get a hold of him," and the stalwart young mulatto mentally revelled in the prospect of the sound thrashing he would administer to his victim.

Every stitch of canvas which the sloop could carry was crowded on, and it was evident that the *Flying Fish* was slowly but surely shortening the distance that intervened between the two little crafts. As she sped along, the two young men argued with each other on the probability that the thieves had already opened the casket or not. It was to be expected that they would have done so on the first opportunity, so as to satisfy themselves with regard to the nature and value of its contents, but Sam contended that the casket being of immense strength and hermetically closed, the thieves had not yet had time to force it open. The operation would certainly require time and powerful tools, and the pursuit had been so hot that the chances were in favour of the casket being still intact. It was not probable, either, that they had opened it while on board the sloop which had carried them away from Grenadilla, as they could not have done so without attracting the notice of the crew of the craft, which they would of course be most reluctant to do.

Jack could hardly restrain his impatience

at the sight of the sloop ahead. The craft contained the casket, on the contents of which depended his whole future, and the young fellow's anxiety was redoubled by the sight of the land now looming clear on the horizon. It was the Island of Trinidad, and if the two rascals managed to land before he did, they might have time to get away inland with their booty, and all chance of recovering the casket would then be lost.

The young planter and his overseer both sincerely wished they had been living in the stirring buccaneering days, when they might have had one of those good old "long toms" so dear to Marryat and Armstrong, when they might have fired away at the craft ahead, and, by a well-directed shot, have brought down her mainsail with a run, and thus effectually put an end to the pursuit. But it was of no use wishing, and the young fellows were fain to be satisfied with the knowledge that their own sloop was slowly gaining foot by foot on the *Bright Star*, and that it looked very probable that they might reach port within a very few minutes of each other.

They were now running between the

Bocas, a lovely group of islets which stud the sea and form a chain leading to the broad bay in which the principal port of Trinidad is situated. The sun was rising slowly, shedding a delightful brightness over the deep blue sea and the charming little fresh green islands which dotted it. Every quarter of an hour seemed to diminish appreciably the distance between the two sloops, and Jack almost fancied that he could distinguish the figures of Sandy Sneat and his black confederate sitting near the stern of the *Bright Star.*

Suddenly a volley of strange oaths and imprecations rolled out of the mouth of the one-legged skipper. He cursed and swore in patois, broken English, and abominable Spanish, and in his evident excitement skipped about the deck like a huge gorilla, every now and then shaking his fist, first in the direction of the *Bright Star*, and then astern towards the open sea.

"What on earth is the matter, skipper?" asked Jack, with a vague feeling of impending misfortune.

"Matter, sir," answered Sam, before the black skipper could give an explanation,

"matter enough, Mr. Moresby," he continued, almost tearing his crisp woolly hair in his rage, "why, we're becalmed, sir, or at least will be, in a jiffy."

There was no need to say more; in less than a minute the wind, which up to then had been blowing steadily, suddenly died away, just as they got under the lee of one of the islands, and the noisy flapping of the now useless topsail plainly showed that all hope of catching up the sloop they had been pursuing was at an end. It was maddening to see their prize sailing away steadily from them, when a few moments ago they had been so sure of catching her up. She had managed to get away from the vicinity of the islands before the wind had fallen, and would probably get into Port of Spain before another hour was over. Our ill-fated craft, on the contrary, with the two young treasure hunters, would probably drift about aimlessly for hours, at the sport of the shifty unstable puffs of wind which blew from time to time round the islands.

Jack rather unjustly vented his intense mortification and disgust on the old skipper, and swore roundly at him for not having

steered more clear of the islands. The old fellow, who was almost as disappointed as Jack, contented himself with muttering a long string of "patois" about how little land-lubbers knew of the difficulties of navigation among the Bocas. The multiplicity of conflicting currents, and the fickleness of the wind which, owing to the presence of the islands, seemed to blow from all sorts of directions except the right one, render the navigation of sailing craft very difficult in that part of the Gulf of Paria, and it was cruelly hard luck that the *Bright Star* with the thieves on board should have been able to get through as easily as they could wish, while the pursuers were now forced to remain in the most heart-rending inactivity. Every moment was of untold value, and there was nothing better to do than to get out the sweeps and wearily make the sloop creep along until they should get her away from under the lee of the islands and meet with a favourable puff of wind. Our two young men's chagrin can be imagined when they saw the *Bright Star*, with her precious cargo on board, finally disappear behind a headland in the

distance, sailing merrily away towards Port of Spain.

After a couple of hours of weary pulling, their fallen hopes were revived a little by the sight of a smart breeze rippling the glassy sea astern, and in a few minutes every sail on board being filled out by the breeze, the *Flying Fish* once more slipped through the water at a capital pace. Time of the utmost value had, however, been irretrievably lost, and it would only be by the greatest luck that Jack could hope to come up with the robbers of the casket in Trinidad. An hour later the *Flying Fish* rounded the headland behind which the other sloop had disappeared, and before mid-day she cast anchor in the spacious harbour of Port of Spain, among hundreds of craft almost identically similar to the sloop they were in pursuit of.

The first thing to be done was to find out where the *Bright Star* was lying, but among the swarm of feluccas, fishing-smacks, canoes and larger craft which crowded the port, it was very much like looking for the proverbial needle in the hopeless bottle of hay. The old one-legged skipper, who ap-

peared much downcast by the general ill-luck, scrambled into a cranky little punt, and bidding the young men follow him, ordered the slippery-looking black boy at the stern to scull as hard as he could towards a forest of small masts at one end of the harbour, where he thought it probable that the *Bright Star* had cast anchor. After wandering about from craft to craft for a space of time, which to Jack seemed an eternity, they finally received the information that the sloop which they were searching for was lying close to the wharf next to a large Venezuelan felucca loaded with cattle. The black urchin sculled away with all his might, and in a few moments the old skipper was hailing and yelling away at a black head which appeared just above the open hatch of the *Bright Star*.

"Hey! Cap'n Bobble, dat you?" calmly answered the owner of the black head; "you just come, eh? De skipper say dat he tink dat been you what we saw 'bout five mile astarn dis morning; but I say no, cause I no 'member dat you get dat new tops'l."

"Shut up your row," vehemently ex-

claimed Jack as he clambered on to the deck of the sloop. "Where's the skipper?"

"Skipper go 'shore, sah," answered the sailor, apparently not at all annoyed at his conversation being so ruthlessly cut short, but rather wondering what was the cause of the white man's evident excitement.

"Gone ashore, eh—when? Who came with you from Grenadilla? Quick—sharp, man!"

The black, with the aggravating cautiousness so well developed in his breed, was calmly cogitating whether he should answer the truth or not, when his mind was quickly made up by the sight of a half-crown which Jack produced from his pocket.

"We bring two passenger, sah, one black man and one white genelman."

"Any luggage?"

"No, sah, dey no bring nothin', 'cept one parcel, done up in black cloth, 'bout so big"—opening his arms to indicate the size.

"That's it, Bret—By Jove! and we're too late. Which way have they gone, my man?" continued Jack, giving the black the coin which had opened his mouth so quickly.

"Well, sah, I hear de white man say dat he no want to go through de custom house, so I spose he got cigars or somethin' like dat in de bundle, and as he pay de skipper well, dey take de small boat and go away quiet—I s'pose dey go land somewhere further along de bay side."

It seemed hopeless. There was nothing more to be got out of the sailor. Sneat and Josiah must have reached land at least two hours ago, and were by this time safely hidden with their booty in some crowded part of Port of Spain. The two young fellows were quite overcome by their intense disappointment, and for some moments remained silent, not knowing what to propose next.

There was nothing to be done but to go ashore and trust to the chapter of accidents. Bret, who had been to Trinidad before, thought he knew where some friends of Josiah's could be found, and there might still be a slender chance of coming up with him there.

The one-legged skipper was paid the promised amount, £10, out of old Quamina's legacy, and the two young men were rowed ashore in a very dejected condition.

Jack was at a complete loss to know what to do. He could not think of a single plan which presented the faintest chance of success. Port of Spain, which he had never visited before, is a large town of some 40,000 inhabitants, and the probability of meeting the thieves by hazard was too hopeless to be entertained for a moment. The idea of inactivity, too, was unbearable, and as a last hope Jack begged his overseer to start at once and lead him to the people who were connected with Josiah. Calling an open cab, Sam bade the dusky coachman drive towards a certain part of the town, where he hoped to find the people in question. So over-wrought were their feelings that neither of the young men uttered a word during the drive. Both feared to venture an opinion as to the chances of their last hope proving of any use, and though knowing that the probabilities of recovering the casket were now infinitesimal, still neither would venture to say so or acknowledge that all hope was gone.

Arrived at the neighbourhood of the place where Bret thought that these friends of Josiah's might be found, the two young

men paid the coachman, dismissed the conveyance, and made their way into some crowded evil-smelling streets, full of half-naked black urchins who scrambled under their feet.

Women of sable hue in bright-coloured print gowns were jabbering and yelling at each other, crying their wares or bargaining over each other's goods; scantily-clad East Indian coolies with greasy black locks and soiled turbans sped along in the dust with bare feet, while sturdy negroes driving before them their donkeys loaded with plantation and garden stuff, jostled them as they picked their way through narrow lanes of tumble-down wooden huts and dilapidated stone buildings.

Perspiring at every pore, the two young fellows finally stopped at a rickety-looking wooden house, which seemed to be a shop where everything of bad quality, from shoe-laces to diseased-looking hams, was exposed for sale. Jack remained outside while Sam entered the dark and loathsome-smelling store. A few moments later the young mulatto came out, with an expression on his face even more downcast than it was before.

"It's all over, I suppose, Bret," mournfully said Jack, before Sam had time to speak.

"I'm afraid so, sir; the man I thought to find here is gone, went away more than six months ago, and these people know nothing about him, nor of Josiah. Cursed luck!" and the young fellow looked ferociously about him, as if he would like to give vent to his wrath by taking it out of somebody.

Jack turned silently away in the direction from which they had come, mutely followed by his overseer, and both proceeded aimlessly for some minutes in perfect silence.

The young planter could not but acknowledge that all his hopes were at an end; those bright day-dreams which had kept him in such a state of excitement during the last three days were dashed to the ground. Fortune had been in his grasp, or, at all events, what appeared to be fortune, for the young fellow with the sanguineness of youth had utterly refused to consider for one moment the possibility of the casket containing anything but articles of immense value. And now all was at an end; the one

chance of redeeming his estate was gone, irretrievably gone, and he felt as if he could never bring himself to consider dispassionately what his future course and plan of life should be. Not only was the estate lost to him, but what was still more precious, the prospect of making Violet his was shattered, and appeared more hopeless than ever. During his furious ride across Grenadilla that morning, in pursuit of the thieves, the young planter's mind had revelled in projects for a happy and delightful future, in which Violet was the central figure, and which would all be brought into reality by the rescue of the casket and its marvellous contents.

It seemed like a dream, or rather a nightmare, and sometimes he almost doubted whether the last three days had indeed been a reality. Old Quamina's legacy was at all events still in his pocket; but what were three hundred pounds, as compared with the almost untold wealth which had been snatched so ruthlessly out of his grasp? Three hundred pounds would do nothing for him. The money might indeed help him to tide over another few weeks, if applied to

Palm Vale, but, at the expiration of that time, his ruin would be none the less complete.

Jack saw nothing else before him; the notice to quit the dear old place; the sale by auction; Violet lost to him for ever, and perhaps induced to marry some wealthy admirer. The last thought was especially bitter to Jack. He could not but acknowledge that, after all, there was no engagement between them. Violet could not be unaware of his love for her, and he felt almost sure that she returned it; but still, except on that eventful afternoon when they had been so ruthlessly interrupted by old Smith, he had never told her of his love, and she might perhaps not know how truly he adored her.

Jack's bitter reflections were cut short by Sam, who not having such a tremendous stake in the lost casket, had long ago summed up his rage and disappointment in a good string of muttered imprecations on the heads of Sneat and Josiah, and by rather bloodthirsty resolves which he hoped one day to carry out on the bodies of the rascals.

"Well, sir, what next?"

"What next?" gloomily repeated Jack, viciously kicking a pebble out of his way. "It's just what I've been trying to make up my mind about. I cannot reconcile myself to the idea that all is over, and the whole thing is at an end."

"Well, sir, I don't see any other way now than to put the matter into the hands of the police, not that I think it of much use though. Indeed, to tell you the whole truth, Mr. Moresby, I hardly think that it's worth while worrying oneself much more over it, for, perhaps, after all, the box doesn't contain anything much, and the blackguardly thieves will be sold after all."

"You are always harping on that, my good fellow," rather snappishly answered Jack, who obstinately refused to consider for one moment the possibility of his overseer's suggestion being correct.

"I'll lay anything that the casket contains the diamonds that belonged to my grandmother, and most probably any amount of other jewels besides. Old Quamina's story was perfectly reasonable, and the very fact of finding the chest confirmed the whole thing."

"May be, sir," assented Sam; "then I suppose we'll have to try the police."

"I'm afraid I see nothing else. They are our only chance. It is what I have been most reluctant to do from the very first, because if the treasure does happen to be recovered by their means, I shall have all the trouble in the world to prove my claim to it. The matter will hang over for months, perhaps years, and possibly end in the Government claiming the whole lot. On the other hand, if the casket is not after all found, the story is sure to get about, and I shall have an infernal lot of trouble to get people to believe that it was not a hoax that I got up for some dark purpose of my own."

"Still, I should try all the same," answered Sam, who had been listening in silence to Jack's argument. "At all events, there's no such great hurry now, and you must be hungry, sir," he slily remarked. After all the travelling and excitement the young mulatto was beginning to listen to the clamouring of the inner man.

"All right, Bret," answered Jack smiling, "you know the town; take me to some

decent place where we can have breakfast, and then I suppose I must go and see the police."

A good square meal did wonders for the young fellows, and it was almost with a feeling of resignation that Jack managed to talk over their misfortune and ill-luck. He determined to place the whole matter in the hands of the police, and as he alone would suffice for that purpose, he arranged that, in the meantime, Bret should wander about the town on the chance of picking up stray information which might perchance be of use in some way or other.

A quarter of an hour's drive took him to the office of the head of the Trinidad police, and Jack was soon closeted with the official in question. Colonel Porter was a charming old fellow. A dapper, rotund little body surmounted by one of the jolliest faces one could find anywhere. He had seen service all over the world, both as a soldier and as a sailor; had gone through half-a-dozen small wars, and had been "honourably mentioned" everywhere. He was rather a Jack-of-all-trades in his way, and had tried his hand at everything, while under his jovial and good-

natured exterior, Colonel Porter had his share of 'cuteness and intelligence. Jack was at first rather diffident about unfolding his marvellous tale about the pirate hoard, the finding of the casket, and the robbery of it during the cane fire. In the broad light of day, and in the prosaic surroundings of the commandant's office, it all sounded quite too marvellous and savoured strongly of those stories which are supposed to have something to do with cocks and bulls. The cordial old colonel, however, quickly put Jack at his ease, and while rather taking Sam Bret's view of the case, he still encouraged the young planter by the chance prospect that the thieves might possibly be caught in Trinidad, and that the matter would be settled soon one way or another.

"The question of 'treasure trove' will of course arise, my dear fellow, but there will be plenty of time to think of that. At all events, you have had an adventure which does not fall to the lot of many in these matter-of-fact days, and I sincerely hope you may manage to get hold of your family jewels, I really do—but all this talking has

made us both dry, I'm sure. Come along with me to my quarters, and have lunch with us. It's about the hour, I think, and my wife will be delighted."

"By the way," chattered on the old soldier, as he led the way to his own rooms, "Moresby, Moresby—surely I know the name. Was your father a Rugby boy?"

Jack having answered affirmatively, and naming the date of the old planter's school days, the colonel was delighted, and shook the young fellow heartily by the hand.

"Why, of course, you must be Moresby's boy; bless my soul, we were at school together, God knows how many years ago. I fagged him for three terms, and a rattling fine fellow he was, too. By Jove, I can't realise it; dear me, how the time does gallop along, to be sure. My dear boy, I'm deuced glad to see you!" and he slapped the young fellow affectionately on the back. The dear old colonel had too much tact to ask how and when his dear old friend had died, and left it to Jack to tell him all about it later. By this time they had reached the part of the building which composed the colonel's private quarters, and a moment or two

later Jack was introduced to the commandant's wife. She was his very counterpart, in nature and manner, and Jack speedily began to look upon them as quite old friends.

Luncheon was about half way through when one of the servants announced that there was a young coloured man below who was anxiously asking for Mr. Moresby and was insisting upon seeing him at once.

"It must be Sam Bret, my overseer," explained Jack rising, "and perhaps he has news. Mrs. Porter, I'm sure you won't mind my going down at once to see him, as you can imagine how anxious I am to find out something which may give me a little hope."

Permission having been readily granted, the young fellow rushed down stairs, and a moment later was confronted by his overseer.

Sam Bret's face showed the greatest excitement; he had evidently been running and was quite out of breath. After a considerable amount of puffing and blowing, he finally informed Jack that after wandering about the town for some time he had made

his way back to the harbour, where among a knot of boatmen he came across the black sailor belonging to the *Bright Star.*

"Do you mean the fellow I tipped?"

"Yes, sir; I asked him if he knew what had become of his two passengers, and you may guess how surprised I was when he told me that he had just come back from the Royal Mail steamer, the one which was lying in the bay when we came in this morning, if you'll remember; by Gums, sir, you could have knocked me over with a humming-bird's feather!"

"Yes, yes, out with it, Bret," said Jack impatiently.

"I'm getting on, sir," answered Sam, good-naturedly, but a little roughed. "Well, the long and short of it is, that the fellow swore that he saw both Josiah and Sneat come on board the steamer with some packages, and among them was the same black one which they had brought from Grenadilla."

"Impossible!" said Jack. "Are you sure that the fellow was not mistaken about the men?"

"Quite sure, sir, for he described them perfectly, and then that black package was

proof enough. He said that he had left Sneat and Josiah on board the steamer, and I suppose they are well on their way to Barbadoes by this time."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE news brought by Sam was so astounding that for a moment Jack knew not what to say. The commandant's house commanded a clear view of the harbour and offing, and as the young planter's eyes wandered in thought, he descried the Royal Mail steamer far away on the horizon, almost out of sight.

What was to be done? Of course the matter could not rest now. Bret's news had revived in an instant all the golden hopes which a few hours before had been nearly extinguished. The fact that the robbers were no longer in Trinidad, but off again with the mysterious black package, confirmed Jack's ideas with regard to the value of its contents. Where are they off to? The steamer on which they were travelling was one of the branch vessels of the Royal Mail line; it would touch at

Barbadoes next day, and tranship its cargo and passengers to the big transatlantic steamer which went on to Southampton. Were Sneat and his companion going on to Barbadoes, or would they go farther on with their booty? These and fifty other questions did the young men put to each other, without satisfactory result.

"Well, Bret," rather triumphantly remarked Jack, "I think that conclusively proves the value of the contents of the casket. Those hounds must have already opened it, and have most likely sold some of its contents so as to pay for their journeys; otherwise where did they get the money from to pay for their passage to Barbadoes? That blackguard Sneat hasn't a penny of his own, I am sure, for he is only just out of gaol."

"Oh, but Josiah?" quickly returned Sam, unwilling to give in. "He's a mean beggar, and the people round Palm Vale say that he must be worth a couple of hundred pounds in cash, at least. He's got three or four acres of full bearing cocoa, and has never spent a halfpenny, if he could possibly help it. I daresay he's paying

the expenses in exchange for a share in the contents of the casket, whatever they may be, and besides, sir," he continued, "I hardly think they can have opened the box yet, because it was so mortally strong closed, and it couldn't be done without special tools."

"Very well, have your own way, Bret, but I still retain my own opinion. However, that is not the thing to worry about at this moment. The question is, what is the best thing to do now?"

At that moment Colonel Porter came down to ask Jack what news he had received. When he was told of the departure of the thieves for Barbadoes, he was somewhat astonished, though rather inclined to think that that island was not their ultimate destination.

"I shall telegraph at once to the police at Barbadoes, and have the fellows arrested immediately after the arrival of the steamer," exclaimed the old colonel, who at once trotted off to his office to dispatch the message.

Jack could hardly demur, but he was nevertheless very much annoyed to think

that the police should be mixed up in the matter. He appeared to be once more fairly on the track, and would have much preferred to be allowed to follow it up by less regular means than the assistance of the recognised authorities. He could, indeed, hardly conceal his intense satisfaction when the colonel, returning, announced amid a string of expletives which he must have learnt in his old naval days that the line between Trinidad and Barbadoes was broken.

"Confound the rotten telegraph; the damned lines are always going to smash just when they are most wanted! This is the second time this month. I'll be hanged if I wouldn't cut down the subsidy if I were the Governor," grumbled the old soldier, fuming.

"Well, there is only one thing to be done now, colonel," rejoined Jack sturdily. "I'm going to follow them to Barbadoes by sloop. With a good wind, I might get there only a few hours after the steamer does."

"And then?" asked the colonel.

"Oh, and then—well, we must leave the rest to the chapter of accidents," answered

Jack. "I'll run up and say good-bye to Mrs. Porter, and then we'll be off in less than half an hour, I hope."

Colonel Porter, although he looked upon the whole thing as very like a wild-goose chase, was infected by Jack's excitement, and sincerely hoped that he might succeed in his quest. He had taken a great liking to the young fellow, and admired his pluck and determination.

Bidding a hasty but friendly farewell to his host, Jack and his trusty follower hurried down to the harbour, and after a search of a few minutes succeeded in finding the little sloop that had brought them down from Grenadilla. The old skipper was sitting on the bulwarks, with his solitary leg hanging over the side. A comical look of recognition relaxed his weather-beaten features as he noticed the two young men coming alongside. Not a word, however, escaped his lips.

"Here, Bobble," exclaimed Jack almost before he was on board, "will you take us to Barbadoes, at once—and when do you promise to land us?"

"Ten pounds, sah! and seven clock

morrow morning," laconically answered the old curiosity, after looking at the mast-head to see the direction of the wind.

"Very well, let us have no more nonsense about calms, mind," said Jack as he and Sam jumped on board.

This Captain Bobble did not deign to answer, but skipping forward, he roughly awakened the two men and boy, who were lying asleep in the broiling sun. They took his orders in a most matter-of-fact way, and received the news that they were to start at once for Barbadoes without showing more emotion than if they had been machines.

In a very short space of time the little sloop was clear of the surrounding crowd of small craft, and was sailing away at a spanking rate in the direction which the Royal Mail steamer had taken some hours before. The hopes of the two young fellows beat high once more, and they were inexpressibly delighted to think that they were again on the track, and with the hopefulness of youth, indulged in all sorts of plans and projects as to their movements when they should reach Barbadoes. The breeze

could not have been more favourable, and the little craft skimmed over the waves with the lightness of her namesake. The afternoon sped away quickly, and when night came on the renewed excitement and hope soon made Jack forget the hardness and discomfort of his bed on the deck of the little sloop, and dreaming of diamonds and gold galore, he slept like a top until the sun was already well up above the horizon. When he and Bret had awakened, they found themselves already under the lee of Barbadoes, and fast nearing the roads, which appeared to be full of shipping.

Barbadoes is about the size of the Isle of Wight, and the land shelves up gradually from the water's edge, culminating in a group of lofty hills in the centre of the island.

There is nothing grand or very picturesque about the place, especially when seen from the sea, and were it not for a few palm trees which shoot up here and there, there is nothing tropical in one's first impressions of the island. The great stretches of bright green sugar-canes look marvellously like English fields of waving corn, and the

whole island presents the appearance of a well-kept garden. The capital, Bridgetown, lies clustered along the borders of the large bay, which gives but an insecure shelter to the considerable amount of shipping generally lying there.

As the little sloop sped on towards the land, Jack made out among the number of vessels lying at anchor five or six large steamers. Among these, two were flying the Royal Mail Steamship Company's flag, one of them being evidently the branch steamer which had arrived from Trinidad a few hours before. She was now lying a short distance astern of a large transatlantic steamer, into which she was busy transhipping some of her cargo and passengers.

"The big one is flying her 'blue-peter,' sir," observed Sam; "I expect she will be off in a very short time. I wonder if those beggars are going by her, or whether they are going to stay here for some time."

"Yes, but what are those other steamers?" interrupted Jack, pointing to two others vessels further in, which were also flying "blue-peters." "That one over

there, the one high out of the water, appears to me to be an American liner, and I am inclined to think that those scamps will more probably make for the States with their booty, rather than go to England with it."

"Well, sir, for the matter of that, we can't tell where they may be off to. Behind the American, I see another steamer which looks as if she was ready to start too. They might go by that one, wherever she's bound for."

"My opinion is that they will go by the cheapest route they can," returned Jack, "and I think they are more likely to go to New York than to any other place. However, there is no use in guessing; the only thing to be done is to board each of the steamers that are leaving to-day, and satisfy ourselves that the men are not on board."

"And supposing we do find them on board one of the steamers just starting, what are you going to do then, sir?" asked Bret, adding—"We can't stop their going or prevent them taking the box with them unless we get it done by the police."

"That is so, confound it! What an infernal nuisance it is to have to get their assistance. I don't want to resort to the police for ever so many reasons. However, I fear there is no help for it, and I must get a warrant out for the pair of them as soon as we get on shore."

By this time the sloop had run through the open waters of the broad bay, and was threading her way through numbers of small craft into the harbour. In a very short time Jack and his companion had bidden adieu for a second time to the old one-legged skipper, leaving him completely satisfied.

Pushing their way along the hot bustling wharves, through a crowd of workers of all shades of complexion, and picking their way past great hogsheads of sugar that streamed with the molasses oozing out of their roasting staves, Jack and his companion soon found themselves in the noisy streets of the town. They were quickly directed by a black policeman to that part of Bridgetown in which was situated the office of the police magistrate, from whom Jack hoped to secure a warrant for the

arrest of both Sandy Sneat and his confederate.

The public offices lie at the end of the busiest thoroughfare of the town, and, every minute being of the utmost value to him, Jack inwardly cursed the motley crowd which put rapid progress out of the question.

The street, which rejoiced in the name of Broad Street—probably on account of its extreme exiguity—was constantly blocked by large drays with their teams of sweating oxen waiting to be loaded with stores for the sugar estates, or by files of buggies containing planters' pretty daughters doing their shopping with faces carefully covered with thick blue veils. On the narrow footpath Jack was jostled every moment by chattering negresses, all clad in white print gowns, and carrying on their heads great trays filled with all sorts of tropical productions. Half-naked black street-arabs jumped about between his legs, often nearly tripping him over. Busy people rushed in and out of the crowded stores, which seemed to sell everything, from saucepans to the latest novel, and everyone

seemed to be in a condition of haste and hurry that looked incomprehensible under that blazing sun. In the midst of this seething and rather evil-smelling crowd, progress was aggravatingly slow, and it was in an execrable temper and profuse perspiration that Jack managed finally to arrive at the building which contained the magistrate's office.

A few moments later he and Sam Bret were ushered into the sanctum of the official in question. It was a large square room of a uniform yellow colour. The walls were lined by formidable-looking pitch-pine presses. The floor was of pitch-pine; the tables, loaded with formidable-looking tomes, were of pitch-pine. Everything seemed to be made of that material, including even the little man who was seated writing at an immense shiny table in the centre. He was the dread official whom Jack wished to see, and, as he raised his head, our young planter could not help thinking that he must have been supplied along with the office furniture, so woodeny was his expression, and so yellow the poor man's complexion. The very wrinkles on

his forehead and wizened little cheeks seemed to have the same curves as the veins in the shiny boards at which he sat, and even the prim sandy whiskers which fringed his face put one in mind of pitch-pine shavings.

Mr. Beccles, as the gentleman was called, beamed on Jack a stereotyped official smile, and, pointing to a couple of chairs, mildly inquired, in a thin dry little voice, what he could do for him. Jack was puzzled to know how he should best begin, and tried to settle in his mind how much of his marvellous tale he was bound to divulge.

"Mine is a very curious and out-of-the-way case," Jack began, when he was interrupted by Mr. Beccles' small voice.

"You must excuse my telling you, my dear sir; but I have very little time at your disposal, as my court opens at eleven." And then he coughed a little apologetic cough, as he looked up at the office clock which hung just over his head. "However, I don't wish to hurry you in the slightest, and I hope that I may be able to do what you want."

"Well, I assure you that you cannot be

in a greater hurry than I am," answered Jack, whose hot struggle through the streets of Bridgetown had not left him in the best of tempers. "The fact is, I want a warrant to arrest a couple of men who have just arrived at Barbadoes, and who, I believe, intend to leave by one of the steamers at present in the port. They have come from Trinidad, and——"

"Excuse me, my dear sir," interrupted the magistrate, who seemed to take particular pleasure in the "My dear sir," "but you have not told me the men's names. Two men, you know, will hardly do. Rather vague, is it not?" And again he smiled that official smile.

"Sandy Sneat and Josiah Sampson," answered Jack shortly. This little Mr. Beccles was beginning to irritate him, and he was sure that he had to do with a punctilious bore of the worst description.

"Sandy Sneat and Josiah Sampson," repeated the little yellow magistrate, leisurely writing down the two names—"quite alliterative." Then, pensively tapping his chin with his pencil, he observed: "Sandy Sneat—Sandy Sneat. Dear me,

what a curious name! Quite alliterative, is it not?"—and again the same smile distorted the pitch-pine wrinkles.

Jack felt inclined to swear at the man, but restrained himself, and merely answered that the name was certainly alliterative. Here were precious moments of perhaps untold value being wasted by this little humbug, and while he was losing his time in making unnecessary remarks about the names of the thieves, they might, in the meantime, be placing their spoil in safety and diminishing immensely the chance of being caught.

"Alliteration's artful aid, eh!" continued the little magistrate unconnectedly, and drumming with his pencil on the table.

This was too much, thought Jack. The man was surely either drunk or an imbecile.

"I must remind you, sir, that the matter is pressing," he said severely, "and I hope you will allow me to relate my case in as few words as possible. The men in question broke into my house in Grenadilla and carried away a casket containing some very valuable articles. There is also reason

to believe that they first set fire to one of my canefields, so as to carry out their robbery with more chances of not being detected in the act. They made off with the casket overland, and——"

"Excuse me," interrupted Mr. Beccles, who appeared to have been listening with an air of profound wisdom, "I did not quite catch what were the contents of the casket. Will you kindly enumerate them?"

The magistrate, with much ostentation, proceeded to spread out a sheet of paper and selected his favourite pen.

"I am sorry to say I can't tell you the contents," rather ruefully admitted Jack.

"I understood you to say that they were very valuable," remarked Mr. Beccles, with a sarcastic smile.

"There is every reason to believe that they are of very great value; it is, in fact, a case of buried treasure."

"Buried treasure! Oh, oh, oh!" and little Mr. Beccles leaned back in his chair and gave vent to a series of cachinnations which sounded for all the world as if some one were sawing at the pitch-pine of which he seemed to be made. "Buried treasure!

how very romantic, and, indeed, I must say —er—improbable," sniggered the little man. "My dear sir, did you ever hear the story of Captain Kidd's hoard? Very interesting, I assure you. It is supposed that in the beginning of the seventeenth century, Captain Kidd, the notorious pirate, buried a——"

"I really don't think that this is the time for your interesting story, my good sir," interrupted Jack, whose last shred of patience was exhausted. "Kindly let me finish my statement, and please take the necessary steps to——"

"Yes, yes, my dear sir," the little man rejoined testily, and lifting up, one by one, the blotting-pad, inkstands, pencils and other things on his desk, he replaced them in exactly the same spots. "That is all very well, my good sir, that is all very well, but you—er—really must excuse my saying so, but your story is so incomplete in details that—er—that——" and he shrugged his shoulders in a deprecating way, as if he were dealing with children.

"Incomplete in details—incomplete!" exclaimed Jack, now thoroughly roused,

"why! my good soul, you haven't let me say a word. You are wasting the time, precious time, with nonsensical remarks. I never heard of such a way of doing business; I want——"

"Enough! my good sir," interrupted Mr. Beccles, with increasing dignity, while his sandy whiskers seemed positively to rustle with offended importance. "I cannot allow such language; violence indeed, I may call it, I really cannot. The hour for my court has arrived, and I must request you to call again this afternoon, when I hope your—er—excitement will have abated."

"But I tell you that every moment is of the greatest importance," exclaimed Jack, rising in his excitement from his chair, "and that I must get——"

"Enough, sir!" imperiously rejoined the little man, sounding a bell, "the interview is now at an end. Your conduct, my good sir, has been most reprehensible, and I wish —er—I could attribute it to—er—excitement. I must request you to withdraw; *must* get, indeed; must is a word not to be used to me," and the little man swelled with injured dignity.

Jack was white with anger. "Well, you're the greatest little——" he broke out, regardless of consequences. Sam begged him to be calm, and Jack, recollecting himself, walked firmly out of the room. The young mulatto, who had been a silent but indignant witness at the unfortunate interview, followed closely on his employer's heels, observing very audibly as he left the room, "The little fool is not able to do his work, sir; he's been drinking."

Mr. Beccles was furious. He wore the blue ribbon on a large scale on his chest, and Sam's Parthian shot offended him much.

Jack was still more angry, and it was only as his ire gradually cooled that he saw how unfortunately he had lost his temper, and how terribly he had reduced his chances of arresting Sneat's progress. The absurd little magistrate had annoyed him intensely, and his natural impatience had caused him to lose his temper in a very short time. He could not imagine how the good people of Barbadoes could put up with such a specimen of the legal fraternity, and if the man's conduct on the bench was charac-

terised by anything like the imbecility which he had displayed in his office, then witnesses, barristers, and accused even must be gifted with a good deal more patience than Jack could boast of.

As matters now stood, the young planter's case was in a hopeless predicament. It was most improbable that the thieves had come to Barbadoes with the intention of staying there, and there was every reason to believe that they would be leaving in the course of the next two or three hours by one of the steamers which were flying "blue-peters."

What was to be done? There was no chance now of getting a warrant from the magistrate until he had adjourned his court. This would not be until the afternoon, even if Jack were able to swallow his pride and bring himself to face Mr. Beccles again in a calm spirit. That, he felt, would be impossible, and even were he finally to obtain the warrant for the arrest of Sneat and Josiah, it would certainly come too late for any use to be made of it. It was maddening to think that the two men were close at hand, within reach, and yet he

powerless to restrain them or to rescue the casket on which all his hopes and prospects depended.

For a few moments after leaving the magistrate's office the young planter walked on in silence, turning over in his mind all sorts of preposterous plans and projects for the rescue of the casket. Slowly and pensively, he and Sam Bret picked their way through the crowded Broad Street, jostled by the seething, perspiring crowd, and each unwilling to disturb the current of the other's thoughts, lest he might just be on the point of thinking a way out of the dilemma. Suddenly Jack turned towards his overseer.

"By Heaven! no! I cannot, will not let myself be beaten like this. Those men are here, and I'll stop them in some way or other, and hang the consequences! Look here, Bret, we'll go and have something to eat at an hotel or some such place, as quickly as we can, and then we'll board each one of those three steamers until we find out which one they are going by."

"And then," asked Sam, who had rather an aggravating way of always wanting to

know where each one of his moves would lead him to, "And then?"

"Then," repeated Jack, stopping for a moment on the edge of the pavement and tugging viciously at his moustache; "then, —bah!—I'm sure I don't know yet, but we'll arrange that presently. You always want to know too much, my good fellow. The first thing is to find out where they are, and then we'll see how they can be stopped, legally or otherwise. I feel certain that my object is worth running a good deal of risk for, and if they do manage to escape us to-day, the whole thing is at an end, so far as we are concerned. The track will be hopelessly lost, and besides, I haven't the means to pursue it much farther."

Continuing their way, they soon arrived at the Ice House, a sort of restaurant, drinking bar, and billiard saloon combined. It is here that the sturdy Barbadian planters most do congregate on those days when they come to town, and they talk by the hour, over their long drinks, of canes, cattle, steam-power, windmills, and all other things agricultural, which are as

Greek to the uninitiated. Here Jack and Sam were soon provided with the breakfast which they were greatly needing, but the excitement and anxiety prevented them from duly appreciating the fresh oysters, the fillets of flying fish, and the delicious lager beer which were specialities of the hostelry. Their hunger satisfied, the two young men hurried down again into the street, and made their way back to the wharf.

Yelling black boatmen dinned the merits of their respective crafts into their ears, and to escape being torn to pieces they threw themselves into the nearest boat. On hearing that one of the steamers was expected to start for Brazil in a few minutes, orders were given to make for that one first, and to pull like steam.

CHAPTER IX.

The midday sun was shining with intense strength out of the pure, blue sky. The sea heaved gently with the great sleepy roll of the ocean, unbroken by a ripple, save where the splash of the boatmen's oars left specks of snow-white foam. Crowds of boats of all sorts were hurrying to and from the steamers and other large craft in the offing. There were bumboats with their loads of bright-coloured tropical fruits and ponderous black females, who sat in the stern sheets. Smart cutters and gigs from a man-o'-war skimmed merrily over the blue water with snow-white sails. Fleets of passenger boats plied between the steamers and the shore, carrying rosy-cheeked young Englishmen just arrived, all anxious to set foot, for the first time, in a tropical island. Now and then passed an official-looking boat full of "water-

police," who keep peace between the noisy boatmen, and settle the inevitable disputes which arise between them and their inexperienced passengers.

Presently the boat approached the steamer which had been indicated to Jack as the one expected to start for Brazil very shortly. As they neared the great black hulk which rose sheer out of the clear water, they could see by the noise and apparent confusion on board that the vessel was evidently preparing to start. Passing under her counter, the boat shot alongside, and pushed its way up to the companion-ladder through the crowd of small boats which lay clustered round it. Jack, followed by Sam, quickly found his way on board, and asking for the captain, was shown a tall burly man, who was just coming out of his cabin.

In his hurry and excitement, Jack had not had time to decide on what means he should employ in order to stop Sneat and his confederate, should they happen to be on board this ship, and, in fact, he trusted more to luck and to the impulse of the moment than to any matured project.

Stepping up to the captain, he very politely asked his attention for one moment.

"Quite at your service, sir," pleasantly answered the captain in the very hard unmistakable accent of the Fatherland.

"Danke schon," answered Jack, "Ich werde Sie nicht einen Augenblick aufhaulten."

"Ach! you speak German, I am delighted, I hear it so seldom out here," exclaimed the captain, and he assured Jack that he would do anything for him that lay in his power.

Thereupon Jack rattled off a certain portion of his story in pure Hanoverian, and soon found the captain quite excited and interested in his adventures.

"I'm afraid you will have to do without that fool of a magistrate, but, on the other hand, I hardly know how you can stop the rascals without a warrant," he remarked when Jack had described his interview with Mr. Beccles, "and to tell you the truth, I must say that I think it much more probable that they will go to Southampton or New York, rather than to Bahia, where I am bound for. However, let us make

sure ; there is no saying, they may possibly be on board this very ship at the present moment. Let your friend here," he continued, pointing to Sam, "go all about the ship and see if he can spot them anywhere. In the meantime, we'll go to the purser and see the list of passengers. We shall soon find out whether a shifty-looking white man such as you describe has come on board, accompanied by a black chap. Come along."

The purser could, however, give them no information, and a few minutes later Sam came aft and announced that he had not been able to discover any sign of the two men they were looking for.

"If I were you, I would not lose any more time here," remarked the skipper. "They are much more likely to be on board either the Royal Mail steamer, or on the Yankee bound for New York, and as both craft look to me as if they were just about to heave anchor, I should make for them at once, and have a good look at the passengers before they are off."

"Quite right, captain," answered Jack, "I only hope the steamers won't start until we

can have a look through them. We'll be off at once."

"At any rate, if these two scamps should happen to come on board before we start, which won't be for another hour, I'll send over to you and let you know: or better still, if your search on the other vessels should prove fruitless, come back and we'll have another talk over it with some rare good old whisky that I have here to keep your spirits up."

Thanking the worthy captain for his kindness and goodness, Jack and Sam Bret got back into their boat with all haste, and directed the men to pull as hard as they could towards the Royal Mail steamers.

"By George, sir," exclaimed Sam, "I'm afraid we're too late; it looks to me as if the shore people were already beginning to clear off the ship. The companion ladder's full of people passing up and down."

"She do go in five minutes," observed one of the boatmen.

"Pull, boys, pull!" cried Jack, urging the sturdy blacks to the utmost. "Five dollars if you put me on board that ship before she starts. But—good heavens, Bret!

—I see the same hurry and confusion on board the other boat. What do you think?"

"You're right, sir," answered Bret, "and it's a toss up whose anchor goes up first."

"This is terrible! What on earth is to be done?" exclaimed Jack dejectedly.

They were just midway between two steamers, and there seemed to be just as much probability that Sneat and the casket were on board the one as the other. If they visited one vessel, there was every probability that the other would have hove anchor in the meanwhile, while if the two men did not happen to be on board the ship they decided to visit, there could be no certainty that they were not gone by the other.

"I have it," suddenly exclaimed Jack. "You go on with this boat to the Royal Mail, while I, in the meantime, will go on to the Yankee by another one, and we'll search them both simultaneously."

No sooner said than done. Two or three passenger-boats were hovering round the vicinity, and Jack quickly transferred himself to one of them, giving orders to make

with all speed for the American liner. Sam Bret, on his part, went on towards the Royal Mail steamer, and was soon lost to sight among the fleets of small boats of all kinds which were clustered round the departing ship.

A few moments later Jack ran up the gangway of the American vessel, which was called the *Sword Fish*, and he set to work at once to find out whether the two men he was in search of were on board the ship.

The decks were littered with piles of all sorts of trunks, hat-boxes, and mysterious-looking packages. Most of the owners of all this luggage were keeping a watchful guard over their traps, spasmodically requesting every steward they caught sight of to have their things taken to their cabins at once, or else they were bidding farewell, for the fiftieth time, to the friends who had come on board to see them off.

Some of the passengers, evidently people who had never travelled before, stirred not a yard away from their precious belongings. Over and over again would they count each

bag and parcel they had burdened themselves with, and they saw a probable thief in every unfortunate person who happened to approach their particular pile of belongings.

Other passengers, mostly American tourists, looked upon these tyros with the superior contempt of old travellers, and they occupied the time remaining before the steamer left in bargaining with the brilliantly-clad black females, who sat in heaps in all the corners of the deck, where they loudly attracted the attention of every one who passed to the excellence of their "hot sauce," "cassarees," "stuffed flying fish," etc.

"What is the number of my cabin?"

"Are you sure we start directly?"

"These two for my cabin, and those black boxes for the hold, please."

"Where's mamma?"

"I don't wish to hurry you, dear, but I am afraid the shore bell has rung."

These and a hundred other similar questions and remarks make up an indescribable hum and confusion on board a departing steamer, and Jack Moresby felt

that looking for Sneat and Josiah among that excited crowd was no easy task. He sought high and low. First, all over and round the deck, then forward and through the second-class saloons and passages, peeping into cabins and state-rooms and closely scanning every face he met.

The stewards, who were rushing about on a hundred errands, were too busy to answer his questions. After searching for a few minutes forward, he was fairly satisfied that the men he was seeking for were not there. Jack then continued his search aft, among the first-class passengers. It did not appear to him probable that Sneat and Josiah would travel first-class, but there was no knowing to what extravagance they might be impelled by the possession of the contents of the casket. The young planter did not leave a single cabin or state-room unvisited, and more than once he excited the suspicions of timid travellers by his investigations in their neighbourhood. All to no purpose, however. Being almost sure that the men were not on board, he went up on deck again for a last look round. The shore bell had rung for

the second time, and there was no time to lose.

Jack's first glance, as he arrived on deck, was at the Royal Mail steamer.

It was slowly gliding through the water barely fifty yards astern of the *Sword Fish.* He had hardly time to collect his thoughts, when his attention was drawn to a man on board the departing steamer, who was gesticulating wildly, and shouting in his direction, in a most excited manner.

It was Sam Bret, who had just caught sight of Jack as the steamer he was on slowly steamed away and increased its distance from the American vessel.

* * * * *

Four days out from Barbadoes; a fair wind and a smooth sea, and the good steamship *Sword Fish* pushes along towards New York at fourteen knots an hour. The beautiful weather has brought every one up on deck, and the passengers are nearly all getting over their sea-sickness, and gradually settling down into the different little cliques which gather together so rapidly, and become so quickly intimate on board ship.

"Fifty and thirty—eighty—bravo!" rings out from the group round the Bull board, as a graceful and fascinating damsel, after missing the whole board three times, manages, by a dreadful fluke, to make a score, and thus arouses the enthusiasm of her side.

"All off," ungallantly and triumphantly cries a podgy little man belonging to the opponents' side, as the fair maiden, paying more attention to the graceful twist of her figure as she throws the quoit, than to accuracy of aim, manages to land the leaden disc about three feet from the desired object, and right on the very tenderest corn afflicting the foot of my Lord the South American bishop, who sits close by with his attention about equally divided between the Bull board and his breviary. Three or four ascetic-looking Spanish priests, on their way from some exotic republic or other to the States, shuffle feebly along the deck, entertaining one another with vivid descriptions of their sufferings under the violent attacks of the treacherous sea-god, while their brethren of the Anglican and Methodist persuasion

form groups on the other side of the quarter-deck, and talk of parishes, cricket, synods, and cock-tails.

A long voyage on board a big steamer affords grand opportunities for the study of human character. People generally throw off a great deal of the reserve in which they wrap themselves up on shore, and all their little foibles, characteristics, good and bad points are laid down to the notice of their observing fellow-passengers. On board ship one finds the very pleasantest people one could meet, and also the most objectionable.

The pleasant people counterbalance the monotony and weariness of a long voyage, but alas! the objectionable people cannot be put out of sight and got rid of, as they can be on shore, and all the disagreeable traits of their characters are brought into most unhappy prominence in the restricted limits of a ship's quarter-deck. One cannot get rid of the bores; they sit beside you at meals, and take your appetite away with their idiotic platitudes; they share your cabins, and make themselves as objectionable as possible by persistently throwing

their clothes about on the top of yours, or by using your towels, or by getting up, washing, and dressing at the very moment you had fixed upon for those operations, and so on through the whole scale of annoyances, which every board-ship bore seems to have spent a lifetime in studying.

There is no getting away from them, and to a sensitive person, who is unhappy enough to have nerves, and who does not take things easily, an otherwise pleasant voyage is made miserable by the ubiquitous presence of these unfortunate people. Some of them are harmless enough, and simply furnish material for other passengers to joke about, while a good many of them form a ready subject for conversation among people who are not blessed with much originality.

Among the board-ship bores may be mentioned the dreadful political man, who dins his plagiarised ideas and opinions into the ears of unwilling victims whom he has button-holed and positively refuses to release. And then there are the wretched people who are always getting up subscriptions and collections for all sorts of

unnecessary objects, or pestering you to take tickets for some absurdity or other when you are in the middle of the most exciting part of a book.

But the bore of bores on board ship is the dreadfully mediocre performer on the piano, who thumps out on the discordant instrument all sorts of antique tunes repeated *ad nauseam.* There are usually several specimens of this particular genus of bore on a large passenger ship, and the average life of a piano is certainly ground out of it during the twelve or fourteen days they are on board. They begin at 7 A.M., and no sooner has one of these persons got through his or her collection of false notes, than another springs on to the vacated stool and scrambles over the unfortunate keys amid the almost undisguised contempt and impatience of the seven or eight others who are waiting in the music-room, until their turn comes to distract the tympana of the more harmless passengers by their discords or mournful howls. Indeed, the instrumental performer, bad as he is, is not half so bad as the board-ship vocalist. There is not much, either, to

choose between the unfortunate individual who thinks he has a tenor voice and howls for ten minutes at a stretch about "love—my love!" in piteous accents, and the irrepressible bounder who shouts the very same vulgar comic song on the slightest provocation, at least twice every day, amid the sickly smiles of those who are forced to listen.

After the first four or five days, however, the sea air, or something or other, soothes one, and you take all these little annoyances in a more philosophic manner, and presently you come to discover some cosy little nook about the ship where you are safe from the attacks of the more aggressively disagreeable people, and have only to put up with the inane whisperings of a spooning couple, or listen to one old party reading to another scraps out of an antiquated journal in a monotone that sends you to sleep in ten minutes.

I remember two old women who used to read out to each other cookery recipes, and each one in turn used to make the other one's mouth water by deliberate instructions in making some sort of sauce or ragout.

These two old souls, of whom one was as fat as the other was lean, went, I am certain, right through Mrs. Beeton's cookery book during the voyage, and rather than yield the comfortable little corner, which I had discovered and appropriated, behind one of the skylights, I used to have to listen to a dreary hungry sort of voice detailing how you were to "put a piece of butter in an enamelled saucepan, about the size of a walnut" (the butter, not the saucepan, I presumed), "throw on a tablespoonful of mushroom catsup, a sufficiency of pepper and salt, a few olives, and a dozen mushrooms, etc. etc." Then the fat old woman's jaws used to work, something like a cow chewing the cud, while she listened to the mode of concoction of some of these supreme delicacies. The thin one would sometimes begin by saying in a clear distinct voice, "Dinner for seven persons," and then she would read out the *menu* of dishes considered by Mrs. Beeton to be sufficient for that number of hungry mortals. After every item, she would generally pause for a moment, raise her eyes to her fat companion, and then both seemed to revel gluttonously

in a mental consumption of that particular delicacy. People generally manage to get outside a fairly considerable amount of food on board ship, but these two souls seemed to have what the French call a "ver solitaire," and would gorge themselves in a manner which gave any one even looking at them an uncomfortable sense of repletion, and yet, after each Gargantuan feed, they would hie themselves to their particular corner on deck, and have another Brobdingnagian but inexpensive banquet out of Mrs. Beeton's luscious imagination.

Strewn all over the deck are always numbers of objectionable specimens of the genus "under ten," curled up and monopolising all the most comfortable nooks, or scrambling over the legs of those unfortunate passengers who are lying in their deck chairs trying their best to conquer that dreadful feeling of alternative vacuum in head and stomach.

"I really think," declares an unfeeling bachelor passenger, to a lady knitting on his left, "that when there are so many children they ought to be put together in a sort of barge, and towed astern, for life on board

ship is simply unendurable with a swarm of objectionable children crawling over the deck."

The lady addressed makes no response, beyond a scathing glance at the old curmudgeon with the heartless suggestions, and immediately beckons to a couple of rosy children, who come scampering up panting.

"Well, darlings, are you feeling quite well now?" Duet of "Oh, yes, mamma!" and voluble and persistent accounts of how Charlie did this and Queenie did that.

"That's right, dears, run about as much as you like, and get a good appetite."

Both rush off, and in his frantic search after a good appetite, Master Charlie manages to trip over the old bachelor's legs with such success that a yelling little boy is seen rolling into the scuppers, a book is sent flying along the deck, and an irate old bachelor strides from the scene muttering curses on the laws of nature in general.

Three old maids sitting together in a heap close to the smoking-room door, where they can see all that is going on on deck, work and talk, that is to say, work little and talk much, from morning till night. Always in

the same spot, never stirring, except for meals, and if any information or news be wanted about any one in the ship, there is nothing that will baffle this amateur Private Enquiry Office.

"I think you said ten chains and then a double, did you not, Miss Bolder?"

"Yes, but let me show you once more," returns the venerable spinster, as she takes the everlasting piece of crochet from the hands of her fair companion. "One, two, three, four, five, six," counts the Vestal, as her nimble fingers work in and out like the shuttle of a sewing machine. "Well, upon my word," interrupts Miss Clackby, the third of the trio of antique Graces, "if they are not at it again; do look! I wonder her mother does not look after her better."

"Yes," rejoins Miss Bolder, "it is really disgraceful! Are they engaged yet? She seems to be throwing herself at his head in a most immodest manner; a girl with money, too."

"Yes, indeed," acquiesces the youngest of the three, "and I don't think him at all good-looking. I never could bear those dark classical types, with features quite un-

naturally perfect, and who is he?" and so on and so forth for the next half an hour.

Jack smiled as he heard the chatter of the old maids, but his smile ended in a sigh as he noticed that the object of the gossip of these three old damsels rather reminded him of one, now so far away.

CHAPTER X.

It was the third day on board the *Sword Fish*, which was speeding away towards New York. As may well be imagined, Jack Moresby's astonishment on seeing his overseer carried away by the transatlantic steamer had been intense. At first he had been at a loss to know what it all meant. The distance between the two ships had been so great that he had been unable to make anything out of Sam Bret's shouts. The mulatto's signs, however, had been more intelligible, and Jack had construed Sam's violent gesticulations to mean that the two thieves were on board that ship, and that he was off with them.

All hope was accordingly not lost, and although it was unfortunate in the extreme that he himself should not have been also on board the same ship, he had great faith in the young mulatto's pluck and per-

severance, and felt sure that Sam would not lose sight of the two men. It then struck him how exceedingly fortunate it was that on the previous day, finding that old Quamina's legacy, which was principally composed of gold pieces, was weighing heavily in his pockets, he had handed over a certain portion of the money to Sam, for safe keeping. This circumstance removed any apprehension he might have had on the score of ways and means, and as the young mulatto had nearly a hundred pounds in his possession, there was no reason why he should not follow the two thieves, wherever they might proceed to with their booty. It was certainly a piece of exceedingly bad luck that he had chosen to visit the American steamer himself rather than the transatlantic, but regrets were of course perfectly useless.

When he found himself thus effectually separated from his overseer, Jack at once decided on the only course left to him. He proceeded forthwith to the purser's cabin and paid the price of a passage to New York. From that place he would transfer himself to one of the Ocean Greyhounds,

and he hoped to arrive in England not more than five days later than the steamer which carried Sam and the confederates. The question of clothes, etc., had at first exercised his mind, but all anxiety on this head was allayed by the knowledge that the *Sword Fish* would call at several of the Leeward Islands on her way up to New York, and at the first one which the vessel touched at Jack procured the few things which he thought he would require until his arrival in England.

To him the voyage was anything but a pleasure. He counted the days and almost the hours which would have to elapse before he could set foot in England. The constant anxiety and uncertainty were very hard to bear, and he looked on every stoppage which the steamer made at the different islands on the way almost in the light of personal injuries to himself.

He worried himself with all sorts of reflections about Sam Bret. Had he interpreted his signs correctly? and if so, what was the young mulatto doing? Sometimes he feared that inexperience would make him an easy victim to the tricks and plots which Sandy Sneat would concoct as soon as he

discovered that he was followed. Sam Bret had never been out of the West Indies, and it was more than probable that his astonishment at and ignorance of the many wonders of civilization which he would witness for the first time as soon as he landed in England would cause him to fall into some irretrievable error which would enable the two men to put leagues between themselves and him. They would thus be free to disappear for ever with their booty in the unfathomable mazes of some populous town, where it would be impossible to trace them.

Eleven days after leaving Barbadoes, the *Sword Fish* cast anchor at last in New York Harbour, and so anxious was Moresby to continue his journey that, on being informed that one of the Cunard line was leaving that day for Liverpool, he simply transferred himself and portmanteau from the *Sword Fish* straight on to the transatlantic steamer, without even setting foot in New York City. The trip across the Herring Pond was performed without incident worthy of note, and it was with immense satisfaction that he finally found himself standing on the quay at Liverpool.

He calculated that the Royal Mail steamer must have arrived at Southampton about four days before, and he almost trembled to think about all that might have happened since then with regard to Sam Bret and his chase after the casket and its robbers. Owing to his unforeseen and sudden separation from his overseer at Barbadoes, it had been impossible to make any plans for a rendezvous in England. It was discouraging to think how much depended on luck and hazard. Many, many times during the voyage Jack had turned over in his mind all the probabilities of the case, and he had come to the conclusion that the odds were greatly in favour of Sneat going straight on to London with his booty, and he devoutly hoped that Sam had been able to follow him thither. Fortunately the overseer had sometimes made himself useful in Jack's office, and consequently knew the address of the agents of the plantation in London. It was therefore probable that Jack would get news of him from them, and he accordingly went on to London by the first express which left Liverpool after his arrival.

It was nearly two years since he had left

England, and it seemed to him quite strange to be back again in the old country once more. What a number of things had happened to him since then, and how changed his position! Two years before he had started for the West Indies full of hope and of rosy plans for the future. His dear old father was then alive, and Jack hardly guessed, at the time, how heavily the estate had been encumbered and what great difficulties the old planter had been obliged to surmount in order to keep things together.

Now he was engaged on what might very probably turn out to be only a wild-goose chase after fortune. The mysterious casket, on which depended all his immediate prospects, might possibly contain nothing of any value, and the little legacy which had come to him so opportunely would have been frittered away and wasted in a profitless journey, making it still harder for him to reconcile himself to settling down in some hard-working groove of life.

Jack arrived in town in the middle of the night, and he looked forward with the greatest impatience to the earliest hour at which he might reasonably present himself

at the office of his agents in the City. He went to an hotel, but though provided with a comfortable bedroom, which, under other circumstances would have proved irresistible after his long sojourn in the cramped cabins on board ship, sleep was now out of the question. He hardly knew what to do with himself during all the small hours of the morning, and it was useless to think of calling at Mincing Lane before nine o'clock at the earliest. He paced up and down in his bedroom, until his neighbours must have thought him insane, and as the slow moments crept along he turned over in his mind, for the five hundredth time, all the changes, probabilities, and possibilities of his immediate prospects. At last half-past eight arrived, and he left his hotel, proposing to walk into the City. The trudge would divert his thoughts and would also serve to while away the time. So intense was his anxiety to get news of Sam Bret, that he refused, even for a moment, to consider the possibility that his agents might have, after all, no information to give him.

Nine o'clock at last struck at St. Paul's,

and devoutly hoping that City men were punctual in the attendance at office, he turned out of Fenchurch Street, and hurried along Mincing Lane until he came to the great, grimy, grey building which contained among fifty others the offices of Messrs. Saccherine, Proof and Company, West India merchants and sugar brokers. He climbed up the great flights of stairs, past scores of offices, tenanted by all sorts of companies which seemed to manage the affairs of every kind of speculation under the sun, and finally arrived at the particular door he was looking for. He was delighted to find that he was apparently not too early, as a number of dapper young clerks were already scribbling away at dingy high desks.

"Can I see Mr. Proof?" asked Jack of a clean-shaven young man, who came up to know what he desired.

"I'll see; I think he has just come in. If you will wait a moment, I will find out if he is disengaged."

The young man presently returned and informed Jack that he had been mistaken, and that neither of the partners had yet arrived.

Moresby could hardly conceal his impatience; and yet, much as he was anxious to get news of Sam, still he was in a certain degree a little relieved to find that his interview with his agents was postponed for a little while. It was going to be a most unpleasant quarter of an hour for him, for Palm Vale was very heavily in the firm's debt for advances and supplies which there was very little chance of paying off in full. Moreover, Jack's mind was so completely taken up with hopes and fears about the casket, that he was hardly prepared just now for a long interview on business with his agents. Perhaps after all one of the clerks might give him the information he wanted.

"My name is Moresby; I'm the proprietor of 'Palm Vale' in Grenadilla," he explained to one of the men, who seemed to be a chief clerk.

"Dear me, yes, indeed?" answered that worthy—coming up and looking at him over the top of his spectacles. "Oh yes, of course, Mr. Moresby—ah," and he gave vent to a sort of "Humph," which conveyed to Jack the idea that the names of

Moresby and Palm Vale did not exactly give unmitigated satisfaction to anyone connected with the firm.

"Ah, yes," continued the chief clerk, "Mr. Proof will be anxious to see you, I know; but I am sure he will be very much surprised when he hears of your arrival in England. It is quite unexpected, I believe. In fact, there is——"

Here Jack interrupted him rather rudely, being far too impatient to listen to the chief clerk's dribblings of dissatisfaction, on the very matters which he rather shunned to contemplate just then.

"Yes, yes, but I've not come to talk over the estate matters to-day. In fact, I am in a great hurry, and only called to find out whether any one had been here during the last few days to inquire for me. Has a young mulatto called—can you tell me?"

The chief clerk was rather offended at being shut up in such an unceremonious manner, and after taking another long look at Jack over the rims of his glasses, turned to one of the clerks and repeated the young planter's question.

Yes, it appeared that a dark-coloured young man had called just the day before, and that he had asked whether Mr. Moresby had been to the office. He had refused to give his name and address, and had simply said that he would call again very shortly. He had not been back since, and that was all they knew.

Jack was delighted, and yet a little disappointed at the meagreness of the news. At all events, Sam Bret was in London, and most probably still on the track of the thieves. Indeed, he might possibly be in possession of the casket itself!

Now what was to be done? Apparently nothing, except to have patience and to wait for Sam's reappearance at the agent's office.

Jack wondered, though, why Sam had refused to give his address. What could have been the reason? He could not think properly in the presence of all those gaping young men, and hastily telling the chief clerk that he would return later to see Mr. Proof, he left the office determining to have a good walk and a quiet spell of thinking over the whole matter. Before

leaving, however, he left the address of his hotel with the clerk, and begged him to give it to Sam Bret in case he called again.

Moresby went down the stairs, slowly turning over in his mind the information he had just received. It puzzled him not a little. Why hadn't Bret left his address? It looked strange. What could have been his reason? At last he came to the foot of the gloomy stairs, and went out through the broad doorway into the hurry and bustle of the crowded street.

Jack was on the point of crossing over to the other side, when astonishment rooted him to the spot. There were the very men he was thinking of, quickly walking along on the opposite side of the street.

How did the case stand now? There was Sam Bret walking arm-in-arm with the two rogues who had stolen the casket—Sandy Sneat on one side, and the black man Josiah on the other. All three evidently on the very best of terms, laughing away at what was apparently some capital joke.

Jack's first impulse was to rush up to

them and stop the trio boldly. He was staggered for the moment, and could hardly collect his thoughts. The conclusion which he at once came to, was that Sam Bret had turned traitor, and had gone over to the side of the thieves. Jack was most reluctant to believe it, but appearances all pointed to that conclusion. The prospect of sharing in the splendid contents of the casket had evidently proved too much for the young mulatto's honesty, and he had gone over to the enemy.

There was no time to lose. Almost unconsciously Jack found himself following the three men at a short distance in their rear. He could hardly bring himself to realise Sam Bret's treachery, and wondered how the fellow could have forgotten all the kindness that had been shown to him, ever since he had been a little mulatto brat working in the "small gang" on the plantation. It seemed so unlike the man's nature, so contrary to all his antecedents; and yet, there could hardly be room for doubt, for at that moment Jack saw Bret slap Sandy Sneat on the shoulder, with an air of the greatest *camaraderie*, and then

take his arm again in the very friendliest manner.

No, there could be no doubt about his treachery. Bret had evidently only gone to the estate's agents to find out Jack's whereabouts, so as to place the greatest distance between him and the confederates of whom he was now a partner.

Jack was strongly impelled to call a policeman and give the whole trio in custody. But on what charge? What could he accuse them of? He could not specify to any magistrate what they had robbed him of, nor could he bring forward a single witness to corroborate his assertions. He would most probably be treated as a maniac, and gain nothing. Naught remained save to follow the thieves, track them down, and trust to good fortune to help him. He did not lose sight of the three men for an instant, and at times so close was he to them that he thought he could almost make out what they were saying.

Stay, what was that? Surely a sign, and addressed to him. Jack was walking about ten yards behind the three men and

watching them intently, when he noticed Sam Bret once or twice raise his left hand to the back of his neck, and make what appeared to be a clumsy gesture in his direction.

Yes, there it was again. Was Sam Bret true after all, and was he bidding him to keep following them, or what else did it mean?

All his unworthy doubts fled from Jack's breast instantly, and he blushed to think he could have harboured them for a moment. There was no time for much consideration or thought. The best thing to do was to continue following the three men, and to take the greatest care not to lose sight of them. This Jack did, and he was delighted to notice, a few moments later, that Sam again made the same signal which had at first attracted his attention, and which, he was sure, meant that he was to keep on following them, and that Sam Bret had seen him.

Sandy Sneat, however, seemed suddenly to grow suspicious, and had evidently noticed the peculiar position of Sam's hand fidgeting at the back of his neck. Jack

had scarcely time to slip into an open doorway, when Sneat turned sharply round and peered quickly up and down the street as if he were looking out for someone. The mulatto, however, apparently succeeded in calming the man's suspicions, for after a moment or two the trio continued their way in the direction they were pursuing.

Jack followed cautiously. The three men walked on ahead, and made their way through several streets eastward, until they reached a narrow dirty slum somewhere in Whitechapel, into which opened a number of squalid, evil-smelling courtyards.

Suddenly Jack lost sight of the objects of his pursuit. As the street was not very crowded, he had been afraid to follow the three men too closely for fear of attracting the notice of Sneat or Josiah; but, as ill-luck would have it, a crowd of people accompanying the remains of some unfortunate creature who had fallen a victim to an accident, surrounded Bret and his two companions for a moment, and when the crowd passed on, Jack was horrified to find that the three men had entirely disappeared.

It was evident that they must have gone down into one of the courtyards on that side of the street, and if Jack could have known the exact one, he might possibly have fallen on their track again. Regardless of the consequences of being seen, he hurried up and ran into the yard which seemed to have been nearest to the spot where he last saw Bret and his companions; but not a sign did he see of them there.

It was a dirty, uneven square of squalid houses, and several narrow passages and gloomy lanes seemed to lead out of it in other directions. A number of unkempt, miserably-clad children were playing among the cobble-stones with broken bottles and dirt, and they gazed with astonishment at the unwonted appearance of a well-dressed man in their wretched courtyard. One or two of the miserable little things, probably taking him for a bailiff or a rent-collector, rushed into the dark doorways to warn their mothers of the unwelcome vicinity of a dreaded visitor. The astonishment of the rest of the children who remained in the yard was immensely increased when Jack

asked them whether they had seen a white man, a brown, and a black one passing through the square a few moments before. It was too much for them, and they gazed at him open mouthed.

"Ga-an, you're kiddin'!" said at last a small boy, retreating to a safe distance, while another mite, evidently quite overcome by terror at the idea of a black man coming into the yard, let alone a brown one, bellowed until the walls echoed again. Then a window was opened in one of the houses by a drunken-looking woman, who, in alcoholic accents, inquired what "the d——d loafer was worritin' about!"

They had evidently not gone into that courtyard, thought Jack, and he determined to try the next. At the entrance of that one he found a seedy-looking man in a greasy black coat, ragged trousers, and apologies for boots. He was smoking some vile tobacco in a short pipe, and seemed to think himself in duty bound to take two or three more whiffs before he answered the question which Jack put to him. Taking the dirty little pipe out of his mouth, he blew a cloud of acrid smoke straight in

front of him, and deliberately scanned Jack from top to toe.

"A black, a brown, and a white, did yer say, mister?"

"Yes," answered Jack impatiently. "Did you see them go in here?"

"Did I see them go in 'ere?" repeated the man, who saw Jack's impatience, and seemed to take a malicious delight in augmenting it. He then proceeded to knock the ashes out of his pipe on his heelless boots with the greatest deliberation, and finally added: "May be I did. You want 'em?"

"Yes," returned Jack, hardly restraining his anger. "Which way did they go?"

"Which way did they go? You looks like yer in a 'urry, mister." And he held his open palm straight in front of his greasy coat.

Jack guessed immediately; time was inexpressibly precious, and, although it went against his grain to encourage such a blackguard as the man looked, he promptly placed a shilling in the fellow's hand.

"Ah, that's more the game, sir! Yes, I saw them three chaps you mention go into this 'ere yard about five minutes ago.

They passed me as they went in, and I took good notice of 'em. One of 'em, the white'n, was awearin' of a low black 'at and a red tie, and the black chump was a follerin' 'im quite skeered like. The white——"

The shilling was doing more than Jack had bargained for, and the seedy-looking man's grim taciturnity had given place to a loquacity which was almost as irritating. The words tumbled out of his mouth like a cataract, and precious minutes were being wasted in listening to useless details.

Producing another shilling, Jack pulled the man up short, and asked him to simply answer one or two questions which he would put. After a little beating about the bush, Jack succeeded in finding out that Bret and his companions had gone into that courtyard, that they had not passed out again, and that it had no other issue save that one gateway. The man could not say, however, into which house they had gone, as his attention had been attracted to the procession with the wounded man just after the three men had passed him.

Evidently the wisest plan was to wait patiently at the entrance of the yard until the three men should come out of it. Jack ascertained from the seedy-looking man that they were certainly not living in any of the houses in that courtyard, so that they were bound to come out into the street again sooner or later. Moresby accordingly posted himself in a doorway a little farther up the street, from whence he could keep a good look-out on the entrance and make sure that the men did not leave the yard without his seeing them.

After a quarter of an hour's watching, his patience was at last rewarded by seeing Sam Bret come out into the street, closely followed by Sneat and the black man. The three were evidently much excited about something, and talked and laughed to each other in a manner which showed that something important or remarkable must have just occurred. Sandy Sneat linked his arms into those of his companions, and led them away down the street; but not before Sam had had time to glance rapidly once or twice up and down the street. He apparently quickly caught sight of Jack, who

was still lurking in his doorway, for, turning round, he made the same sign which had first attracted Moresby's notice in Mincing Lane.

Taking this to mean that he was to follow, Jack left his vantage-point, and, steadily keeping in the three men's track at a discreet distance, he fervently hoped that an opportunity might soon occur when he might communicate verbally with his overseer.

Sam and his two companions now walked along in a leisurely slouching manner, as if time were no object. Two or three times, in fact, on their way through numbers of dirty narrow streets, they stopped at public-houses, and each wait seemed to Jack of interminable length. Finally, however, they reached the neighbourhood of the Tower, and, although they had walked for nearly three-quarters of an hour, Jack, though following carefully in their wake, had had no opportunity for the slightest communication with Sam Bret. At last the three men entered a narrow street, and presently they stopped in front of a dingy-looking building, which looked like a

lodging-house of the lowest type. The ramshackle front door was apparently not locked, nor did any ceremony appear necessary about knocking or ringing, for Sandy Sneat simply turned the handle and disappeared into the passage, closely followed by Josiah. Sam Bret was the last, and before going inside he turned quickly round towards Jack, nodded his head twice, put a finger on his lip, and signed to him to go away quickly. He seemed then to be called by someone inside, for he suddenly entered the house and closed the door behind him with a bang.

CHAPTER XI.

'Tis "Tennis-day" at Government House, Grenadilla. It is a little early yet, and only a few people are round the courts. Tennis day is also a "calling day" at the residence of the Governor, and people generally pass on to the grounds after partaking of the regulation cup of tea and a piece of cake with the Governor's lady in the drawing-room. A good many of the young people who have a standing invite for tennis, generally forego the solemn pleasures of tea and cake in the drawing-room, in order to have a game or two more during the afternoon, by starting early. The days are not long in Grenadilla, and as it is too hot to play tennis before half-past four, the young folk try to get as much fun out of the balls as they can before the sun sets at half-past six. The Governor's tennis court is a very good one :

It is made of nice clean asphalte, and is well shaded by fine mahogany trees. Space, however, is wanting, and in order to get a level spot large enough to give sufficient ground for running back, part of a little hill-side had to be cut away. On this little slope a small spot has been levelled off, and a row of garden seats await the middle-aged ladies and gentlemen who come hither to gaze at and criticise the energetic young folks who are running about over the asphalte.

Presently comes the first detachment from the drawing-room. With stately steps and granite-like demeanour, the portly form of Mrs. Topman, the wife of the attorney-general, majestically advances along the gravel path leading to the row of seats, accompanied by a timid little planter, who regards her with great awe, and is so nervous that he can hardly frame words to answer the two or three remarks which the lady deigns to address to him. Mrs. Topman has a great contempt for planters; and any one not belonging to the high official ranks she hardly considers as existing. "Those bush people, don't

you know," is her usual expression when talking of those unfortunate people who own and cultivate the broad lands which have belonged to their families ever since the island was first colonised, and who supply the money to pay her husband's salary. But, then, Mrs. Topman is the niece of a K.C.M.G., who obtained that honour because he lived long enough, and she would probably die of mortification if she thought that there remained a soul in Grenadilla who was ignorant of her high parentage.

Then come two or three batches of nondescripts who don't count for much. They never miss a single calling day at Government House, and nobody thinks of noticing them beyond a "How do you do," or an informal nod. Some of these nondescripts are males, others uninteresting dames and maidens. No one troubles about them, and they simply do to "fill up." If any of them should by any chance be absent, the void is noticed just in the same way as the *habitués* would miss a garden seat or a table which were generally to be found in a certain spot.

Every one knows who they are. Most of them are minor officials, parsons, merchants, or the wives of such. They don't seem to live except on Government House calling days, and then they rise to the surface bi-weekly.

Mrs. Topman and her nervous little companion, who does not know what to do with his hands, have taken up their position on one of the garden seats in the *galerie*, and the lady turns her critical eye on the other people who are now coming up the gravel walk. Presently she is joined by other dames of local high degree. Mrs. Tarleton, the spouse of the Colonial Secretary, a pretty and stylish young Englishwoman, whose cheeks are fast losing the rosy tints they wore when she first came to the colony a few months before. The wife of the Chief Justice, Lady Blunt, a stout, matronly, comfortable-looking woman, deaf as a post, and always smiling that same smile of placid contentment which stone-deaf people usually have. Then there is the wife of the Treasurer of the colony, a delicate, thin, lady-like little body, whose conversation always begins and ends with "babies." These dames represented quite

the *crême de la crême* of Grenadilla society. Other people might be all very well, of course, and have thousands a year, but then, poor things, you see their husbands were not Colonial Secretaries, Treasurers, and so forth, with salaries of as much as six hundred pounds per annum.

"Who is playing on the opposite side?" asked Mrs. Topman, carefully adjusting gold eyeglasses on her very aquiline nose. "Oh, young Menton and Miss Prendergast, is it? Dear me, how that young woman does run about! I really cannot understand young girls nowadays; they seem to think less of their figures than even men do. I wonder if she knows that her petticoat is about two inches below her dress! I don't suppose she would care much if she were told of it, though—she appears to have very curious ideas."

"Oh, I don't know," interposed the Colonial Secretary's wife, "Miss Prendergast is a rather nice girl I think; she goes in, heart and soul, for anything she does."

"Quite so," rejoined Mrs. Topman, pursing up her lips, and shutting up her eyeglasses with a little click. She was

ruffled at the idea of any person presuming to differ even ever so slightly from her when she was about to pass judgment.

That stuttering old person, Mr. Smith, just then trotted up the path towards the ladies. Mrs. Topman greeted him with a majestic inclination of the head.

"Oh, Mr. Smith, can you give us any news of young Mr. Moresby and his mysterious disappearance more than a fortnight ago? It is really quite a curious affair."

"Very c-c-curious," answered the old man; "very c-c-curious indeed, Mrs. T-T-Topman; and all the m-m-more so when you c-c-consider the very embarrassed state of his af-f-fairs."

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Bartlett, the Treasurer's wife.

"Oh, don't you know," answered Mrs. Topman, before the old stutterer could frame his reply. "It appears that his estate, 'Palm Vale,' you know, is mortgaged up to its last acre, and indeed, the attorney-general says that it will shortly be sold for the benefit of the creditors." Mrs. Topman always spoke of her husband as the attorney-general; the husband, for

her, was quite submerged in the official, and by the pompous way in which she rolled out "General," one might have been led to believe that it was closely allied to field rank. "His disappearance, I must say, is very remarkable; so mysterious! No one seems to know anything about it. The servants even at 'Palm Vale' have not heard a word from him, and seem to expect him back at any moment."

"Well, I c-c-can tell you pretty exactly where he is," rejoined Mr. Smith. "Perhaps you did not hear that the night of the f-f-fellow's disappearance, m-m-my house was b-b-broken into, and a b-b-bold attempt made to rob a large sum of money, which had been p-p-paid into my hands that day."

"You don't say so?" said the three ladies in chorus. "But surely, you can't suspect Mr. Moresby of having anything to do with it?" remarked the Colonial Secretary's wife. "Mr. Moresby is a gentleman, and the idea would be preposterous."

"No, I shouldn't like to c-c-commit myself to saying anything, but you m-m-must c-c-confess that the whole matter looks very strange. My house is b-b-broken into in

the middle of the night by one or two m-m-men who have not yet b-b-been identified. One of them wore b-b-boots, because his footprints were f-found on one of the garden b-beds. The robbery was, however, unsuccessful, as I heard the noise, and r-raised the alarm. The same night, this young f-fellow, Mr. Moresby, who is well known to be in g-great difficulties, and in urgent want of m-money, disappears, together with his overseer, a young m-m-mulatto c-c-called Bret, and leaves the island."

"Leaves the island," repeated Mrs. Bartlett, who, like the other two ladies, was intensely interested in the mystery. "How did he leave? It is well known that Mr. Moresby did not go by any of the steamers that have called at Williamtown."

"N-no, he d-d-didn't," returned Mr. Smith, "b-but, as I had strong suspicions, I made inquiries all over the island, and I f-f-found that he and his overseer were s-seen riding over the mountain road to Rougeville in the g-g-greatest hurry, and that they l-l-left for T-T-Trinidad in a dirty little sloop."

"Really, this is most exciting, and quite romantic," declared Mrs. Topman. "And is that all?"

"N-no," answered the stuttering little man, who was intensely pleased to find himself made so much of by the three ladies. Usually these dames of high degree voted him a vulgar little bore, and would only take the barest notice of him; to-day, however, they were hanging on his lips, figuratively speaking, and he quite swelled with gratification.

"N-no; I caused inquiries t-to be made in Trinidad, and f-found that instead of remaining there, they had left again, the same afternoon, by the s-same little s-sloop, for destination unknown, or, at all events, my informant c-could not find out anything more. Now my firm belief is that they have gone over to the Spanish Main, and that Mr. Moresby, even if he was not c-concerned in the attempt on m-m-my money, has d-done something to be ashamed of, and has c-c-cleared out of the place, leaving the estate to f-fall into the hands of the c-creditors, as it was b-bound to do very shortly."

"And is that all you know, Mr. Smith?" asked the Colonial Secretary's wife.

"Y-yes, so f-far," answered the little man.

"Well, I think it is very little, and certainly not half sufficient to entitle you to throw such atrocious suspicions on Mr. Moresby. He is a thorough gentleman, and I feel sure is quite incapable of such a crime as you tried to impute to him. I am quite certain that very shortly the young fellow will return and account for his mysterious disappearance in a perfectly satisfactory manner."

And the Secretary's pretty wife turned round in her garden seat in such a manner as to show old Mr. Smith that he had incurred her grave displeasure. The other two ladies were annoyed to think that they should have vouchsafed him so much of their attention, and had only done so, thinking that he was about to impart some startling piece of news. They considered that he had in a way taken them in, and when, a moment after, little Mr. Smith attempted to stutter a sort of explanation to Mrs. Topman, that lady surveyed him through her gold glasses with such an air

of piercing frigidity that the wretched man felt as if he were visibly shrinking.

"Who is that coming up now?" asked Mrs. Bartlett, as she caught sight, through the trees, of some people coming along from the house towards the tennis-court.

"Mrs. Nettley and her son, I think," answered Mrs. Topman, once more putting up her glasses. "Very uninteresting young man that son of hers is, I think, and yet she is quite wrapped up in him, poor thing."

As these two persons will play a considerable part in this story, a few words about them may not be amiss.

Mrs. Nettley was a dear little old lady, with sweetly expressive grey eyes and snow-white hair. She always spoke in a soft, musical voice with a slight Scotch accent, which was very pretty to hear. Every one was fond of her, and even in Grenadilla, where people are not too unanimous in having a good opinion of any one, she was never mentioned in any other way than as "dear old Mrs. Nettley." She had been a widow for very many years, and her whole existence seemed to be wrapped up in that

of her son, to whose happiness and comfort she devoted herself entirely. With a mother's fond eye, she saw in him only everything that was good, and she really thought that such another son as he did not exist in the whole wide world, and that, if not strikingly brilliant or accomplished, he was, as she would say, "such a dear boy, and so good."

To any one who did not look at him from his mother's standpoint, Joseph Nettley was what is known as a decent sort of a fellow, and very good, indeed rather too good if anything, also undoubtedly "slow," as most good people are. He was a little under the medium height, sturdily built, but not clumsy; had sandy-coloured hair, light blue eyes with very scanty eyebrows, and a small reddish moustache. His father had been a wealthy planter, and the large amount of property which he had left at his death had accumulated greatly and largely increased in value during his son's childhood, so that Joseph Nettley's income was far and away larger than any one else's in Grenadilla. He was accordingly looked upon with great favour by all mammas

with marriageable daughters. Although he was a little over thirty, he had never fallen a victim to the tender advances of any of the amiable damsels who had done their best to become mistresses of the good-hearted Joe and of his handsomely-lined pockets. His mother's love and tender care seemed to suffice, and the aforesaid amiable damsels had begun to give him up as a bad job and a confirmed bachelor. They were wrong, though, for honest Joe Nettley's heart had gone a long way out of his own possession, and he was far more deeply in love than it could have been thought possible in such a well-regulated, evenly-balanced nature as his seemed to be. His sentiments were patent enough, too, to any one who took the slightest notice, and just at that moment, as he and his mother were coming up the little gravel path, he heard a very pretty, well-bred voice, and a melodious laugh a little way behind him, which caused the poor fellow's cheeks to tingle, and the blood to rush up in a wave to the roots of his hair. He was so nervous that he could hardly frame the words to form the simple "How do you do" with

which he greeted Violet Lee and her mother, who were walking up from the house with the Governor's wife.

"Where on earth does she get her gowns from?" was Mrs. Topman's remark to one of her neighbours, as she noticed Violet coming up towards the garden seats with the rest of the group. "That Miss Lee dresses as if she were an heiress with five thousand a year, whereas it is well known that she is nothing of the sort."

"She had every prospect of being so, I believe," answered the Colonial Secretary's wife; "and if her aunt had not died suddenly without having made a will, there is no doubt that Violet would have been very well off. I'm sure I'm very sorry for her altered prospects, for she is a dear good girl, so pretty and unaffected. I like her very much."

Mrs. Topman was silenced again for the second time this afternoon. For some reason or other she had taken an antipathy to Violet; but then, on the other hand, this worthy dame had a sort of rooted dislike to all young people, especially if she thought they did not look upon her

with the awe and reverence which she considered that the wife of the Attorney-General ought to inspire. Violet most certainly did not look upon her with any particular awe or reverence, and indeed hardly deigned to take the slightest notice of the lady or of her disagreeable remarks —much to Mrs. Topman's disgust.

Violet's gowns were a source of considerable envy on the part of the less well-favoured girls and matrons of Grenadilla society, but they were bound to confess that the dresses in themselves would not be of much account were it not for the style with which Violet wore them. She had the innate taste of a Frenchwoman, with the refinement of an Englishwoman in the matter of clothes, and the simplest gown on her was at once invested with a grace and style which made it look as if it had been turned out by the best *magazin de modes* in Paris.

Sweetly pretty she looked this afternoon, in a soft white gown of some lacy-looking material, with a large picture hat of slate-grey feathers, long rucked-up gloves of the

same tint, and a waistband of curious old silver. She had not come to play tennis, so after exchanging greetings with the ladies already in position, she took her seat between Mrs. Bartlett and one of the nondescripts.

The Governor's wife, Lady Redfield, a charming, thorough-bred little woman, flitted about, exchanging a few words with all her guests, always saying the right thing to each, and leaving the impression on every one as she moved away from them of what a perfect little lady she was, and how charming a Governor's wife could be.

It was a very pretty spot. The tennis-court was on the top of a small hill, and from it one commanded the most lovely views of tropical scenery on every side. To the south the valley stretched down to the deep blue sea, past the pretty little town with its red-roofed houses and waving palm-trees. On the other three sides the eye wandered restfully over the dark green hills and mountains stretching away into the interior of the island; the serene expanse of the blue sky only broken by

the fleecy little clouds that played about the summits of the loftiest peaks. The sun was very little above the horizon, and its soft rays just lighted up with a reddish glow the outlines of the undulating hills. In some places the green shadows of the thick vegetation would mingle with these crimson rays, and formed exquisite tints of indescribable softness; the shadows caused by the undulations of the hills would in some places be a deep, restful violet, while further up a delightful shade of pink rested on the clumps of trees and palms. In short, the scenery in Grenadilla is lovely, and the tennis court at Government House commands some of the most beautiful.

Mrs. Lee settled herself beside Mrs. Topman, and was soon deep in conversation with that lady. The Attorney-General's wife, indeed, was inclined to be very friendly with Violet's mother; probably Mrs. Lee's rather supercilious air, and the fact that she was first cousin to a baronet, had something to do with it.

Besides, Mrs. Lee had a little manner with her which rather subdued Mrs. Topman, and indeed the highly-refined and

very aristocratic languor which characterised all her words and movements nearly always abashed forward or vulgar people, and kept them in their places. Mrs. Lee was treated with great deference by every one in Grenadilla, and Mrs. Topman never thought for a moment of including her in the category of "bush people." The poor lady was, however, not feeling at all happy that afternoon, and indeed she had shed several tears during the drive to Government House, in the course of a dreary and painful conversation she had had with Violet.

Things were looking very black indeed now, and the difficulties and troubles which Mrs. Lee had always steadily refused to face and recognise, seemed to be looming up desperately near, and they utterly refused to be dismissed with a passing sigh or disagreeable thought.

The affairs of "Belvoir" were being managed, as attorney, by a young man who had more business on his hands than he could properly look after. He had simply been satisfied with placing as good a manager on the plantation as he could find, and had left the place to shift for

itself as well as it could. Once indeed, when he had hinted to Mrs. Lee that no plantation in difficulties could ever possibly right itself so long as she persisted in drawing upon its capital value to the extent she did, the good lady, in her most freezing manner, had made certain remarks to him which made the young man firmly resolve to let things slide. He accordingly furnished the funds which she used to requisition in a very laconic formal note at periodical intervals, and continued doing so until the utmost limits of money-raising had been reached. Instead of retrenching and economising as any wise woman would have done, Mrs. Lee did not abate one jot of the style or luxury in which she had been accustomed to live, and when the plantation was floundering in hopeless debt and irretrievably on the road to the Encumbered Estates Court, Mrs. Lee persisted in keeping half-a-dozen servants, three or four good horses in the stables, entertaining and living in every way as if she had a clear income of two or three thousand a year.

Although she always dismissed such thoughts as invariably bringing on neu-

ralgia, and what she called *migraine*, she nevertheless had to confess to herself that the outlook was very threatening. However, she considered that she did quite enough to stave off complete ruin by foregoing the trips to England, which she had always been accustomed to have when her husband had been alive. Indeed, she thought that in suffering that deprivation, she was really sacrificing herself in a most meritorious manner to the interests of the estate.

Matters had now, however, come to a climax, and in answer to one of her usual formal requests for money, the attorney had that morning sent a cruelly business-like letter informing her that as she had persisted in disregarding the warnings which he had from time to time addressed to her on the subject of the estate, it was his unpleasant task to acquaint her that he had been entirely unable to raise another hundred pounds on the security of the estate, The mortgagees had that day notified to him their intention of foreclosing, and had indeed already taken the preliminary steps. He then went on to say that she must now

make her preparations for leaving the plantation at no very distant date, and in order that she might not suffer any immediate inconvenience, he begged to enclose a cheque for £50, which was the utmost limit he could go to, and which sum he hoped she would secure to him by a lien on the furniture.

Poor Mrs. Lee quite broke down on the receipt of this cruelly plain letter, and took to her bed with an agglomeration of all her ailments — neuralgia, *migraine*, heartache, and half-a-dozen other lady-like complaints. Then there ensued a great scene of weeping and wailing, accompanied by useless recriminations and regrets. Mrs. Lee tearfully accused Violet of being callous and hard-hearted, simply because she did not give way to a tempest of tears and sighs, and for comfort the poor woman turned to her deformed daughter. Charlotte Lee was closeted with her mother in a darkened bedroom for hours. Violet, after a lapse of considerable time, beginning to get anxious at the continued silence, at last called Mrs. Lee's maid, and was informed by her that both ladies were quietly sleeping, and that

they had dozed off very shortly after retiring to the bedroom.

Mrs. Lee awakened shortly after, and beyond a few subdued whimperings showed that she had evidently recovered a good deal of her equanimity. The poor lady was unable to sustain the prolonged effort of thinking over her troubles, and even now that the blow had fallen, she still seemed to have recovered her faith in Providence, and was either resigned to a dreadful change in her hitherto luxurious life, or was still sanguine of some fortunate occurrence which would put her troubles to flight and remove her anxiety for the future.

Mrs. Lee had suffered a great shock when the news reached her that her sister-in-law had died intestate, and that Violet, on whose help she had entirely relied, was consequently penniless. But when, a few months before the opening of this tale, Violet had come out to Grenadilla looking so pretty and stylish, her hopes had risen again, and Mrs. Lee had quickly made up her mind that Violet should retrieve the misfortunes of the family by marrying some wealthy bachelor in Grenadilla.

Violet, however, as we have seen, had not proved so anxious to fall in with her mother's views as that good lady had hoped, and had persistently refused to give the slightest encouragement, to the evident admiration of some of the eminently desirable but rather bucolic suitors whose good qualities and praises Mrs. Lee was never weary of singing. One of the most desirable of these postulants for Violet's good graces was Joseph Nettley, of Rockmount, and although sometimes she could hardly refrain from making merry over his painful shyness and blushing admiration of her, still Violet did not dislike the honest fellow at all, and really admired him for his sterling good qualities. She had heard, too, of one or two little acts of unostentatious kindness which he had done to people in difficulties, and she often tried her best to make him feel at ease, and would chat pleasantly with him on those subjects which she thought interested him most.

It was not often that Joseph Nettley dared to go beyond the limits of the most ordinary conversation, and when, once or twice, he had ventured to make her a some-

what tender but nervous little speech, Violet could not help feeling very sorry for his evident distress when she somewhat curtly nipped in the bud these attempts at courtship.

Mrs. Lee, nevertheless, had still hoped that things would come right at no distant date, and that Violet would be sensible and wake up to the desirability of being mistress of Rockmount and of a comfortable income of five or six thousand a year. But the appearance of Jack Moresby on the scene, had made her tremble for the success of her plans. She did her best to discourage his visits at her house, but could not prevent the two young people meeting each other at other places, and although looking upon him with no favourable eye, she could not help noticing what a handsome couple they made when they were walking or dancing together. Such a union, however, could not be thought of for a moment, and it was with feelings of the most intense satisfaction that Mrs. Lee heard of Jack's mysterious disappearance from the scene.

Violet did not know what to make of his sudden departure. She looked back with

unfeigned pleasure to that last ride with Jack, and was puzzled and anxious beyond measure at his mysterious flight. She remembered every word he had said to her before they were interrupted by little Mr. Smith, but still she was bound to acknowledge to herself that he had said nothing very definite. She had a sort of consciousness that he loved her, and the thought sent the warm blood rushing to her cheeks with unacknowledged delight, but again, on the other hand, why had he not told her of his approaching absence? Perhaps he had only been flirting with her after all, and she was possibly exaggerating the meaning of his words and glances.

It was all a great mystery. Where had he gone to? and was he coming back? No one seemed to know anything beyond the fact that Jack and his overseer had been last seen at the cane fire, and that they had remained there until it had been quite extinguished. In the meantime Mrs. Lee's insinuations, tears, and even entreaties were redoubled, and Violet was sorely distressed by these constantly recurring scenes which always ended by her mother tearfully

declaring that Violet was most heartless, and would cheerfully see her poor mother and sister torn from their comfortable home and reduced to absolute beggary, simply through her heartless persistence in refusing to give the slightest encouragement to any one of the half-dozen thoroughly good and eligible suitors who would make her perfectly happy.

We must now return to the tennis-court after this long digression. Mrs. Lee, after three minutes' conversation with Mrs. Topman, was put in possession of the information which old Mr. Smith had afforded with regard to Jack's disappearance, and, the wish being in a degree the father of the thought, Mrs. Lee persuaded herself at once that there must be something disgraceful in the background which had caused Jack Moresby's mysterious and sudden disappearance. She determined to make the most of it, and resolved that Violet should be informed as soon as possible of the very suspicious circumstances that had attended Jack's departure from Grenadilla.

Nettley, as soon as Violet had taken her seat, advanced towards her and took up a

position behind her chair. He was almost satisfied by the mere fact of being near her. It was a delight to him simply to hear her voice and to note the pretty dimples in her cheeks, and the pearly little teeth that glistened through the rosy parted lips whenever she smiled. Now and then she spoke a few words to him, and although he could only answer in commonplace terms, he felt as if he could lie down at her feet and be cut into a thousand pieces, only for the inexpressible delight with which her slightest notice filled him. Violet, with a woman's natural intuition, knew her influence over him, and felt very much for the poor fellow. The remembrance of Jack, however, steeled her heart against any other feeling than that of pity, and she sincerely hoped that time would cure him of his infatuation.

It was getting late, and gradually the nondescripts had plucked up courage and gone through the ordeal of saying good-bye to Lady Redfield, and had been duly picked to pieces as they passed down the gravel path. Presently, Mrs. Topman made a move, and imperiously signified her inten-

tion, to her little husband, of proceeding homewards. Mrs. Topman's spouse did not seem to fit the high-sounding official title which the lady delighted in knowing him by, and he was as meek and insignificant-looking as Mrs. Topman was loud and domineering. He, with some of the other husbands, usually dropped in late at Government House on tennis-days, and after a peg or two of iced whisky and soda took their wives back to their respective houses.

Mrs. Lee walked towards her carriage with Mrs. Nettley and her son, and was as gracefully cordial to them both as she could possibly be. She noticed that Violet was walking with another lady a few paces behind and out of earshot. "Oh, my dear Mrs. Nettley," she said, with her most delicately languid air, "how I do envy you in having a good devoted son to look after you in your old age; girls are all very well, don't you know, but they are not the same strong support to their mother as a good affectionate son would be."

Poor Nettley, who was walking on her left side, could not help whispering in Mrs.

Lee's delighted ear that if the matter only depended upon him, she would not be long without, if not a son, at all events as affectionate a son-in-law as she could think of. Mrs. Lee turned to him and said she was delighted to hear him say so, and assured him of her assistance if it were needed.

"But I'm afraid she will never care for me, Mrs. Lee, although God knows I love her better than any man could," answered Nettley, blushing to the roots of his hair.

"Girls very often hide their feelings, you know, and I am sure that Violet's sentiments are quite the reverse of unfavourable to you. You must have a little more courage, my dear boy," said Mrs. Lee in quite a motherly little way. She had a conscious feeling that she was acting wrongly in giving the young fellow so much hope, and was even a little conscience-stricken when she saw the flush of ill-concealed happiness and hope which suffused his face as he listened to her words.

"You make me happier than you can imagine, Mrs. Lee," he answered, pressing the little gloved hand which rested on his arm; "but I do sincerely trust that you

have not given me too much hope. I'll do my best to pluck up courage to tell her of my love, but do you know, Mrs. Lee, I am so dreadfully nervous, and I feel such an utter idiot when I find myself alone with a girl. It seems to me as if she must be thinking all the time of what a wretched bore I am, and indeed, I often feel that I must be that," said the poor fellow, suddenly stopping himself, half astonished at the idea of his having had the boldness to express his feelings so openly to any woman, even though she were only Violet's mother.

"*Allons, du courage, mon ami,*" said Mrs. Lee, as he handed her into her carriage. Violet was close behind, saying good-bye to Mrs. Nettley, and when Joseph held out his hand to her, she noticed that he had never before seemed to look so boldly and with such confidence in her face. He even went so far as to press her hand slightly but unmistakably as he assisted her into the carriage. In return, Violet bade him good-bye in her very coldest tones, and hardly even looked at him as the carriage drove off.

"Oh, mother dearie, it's no use, she'll

never care for me," said Nettley, with a deep sigh as he seated himself next to the old lady in their comfortable Victoria. "I don't believe what Mrs. Lee said about Violet's feelings being the reverse of unfavourable to me, although I was fool enough to hope it could be really true at the moment. What can I do to make her understand how much I love her? Surely she can't remain so cold when she realises that there is not a moment in the day when I don't think of her. I can't live without her, mother." Then he put his arm round the old lady, and drew her to him. "I know I have you, my dear little old mater, but then—but then——" and the poor fellow finished the phrase by a kiss on the soft white hair on the dear old lady's forehead.

"My poor dear boy," she answered, smoothing his hand with one of her delicate white ones, "don't despair, dearie, be patient, and she must, if she be a good girl, as I believe she is, be touched by such devotion as yours. But, perhaps, it would be better, Joe," she went on, "to try and think less of her, and get over this feeling

which has taken such possession of you. Perhaps she cares for some one else, my dearie; indeed, you know she used to be very often seen with that young Jack Moresby who has disappeared so unaccountably.

"Oh, I don't know; at all events they are not engaged, mother, I'm sure, and then perhaps it may be as Mrs. Lee said, girls often hide their feelings. I can't give her up, or leave off hoping that she will one day turn to me and return my love. Oh, how unjust and senseless fate seems! Here have I health, more than sufficient money, a comfortable home, and the best, most loving mother in the world, and yet I'm wretchedly unhappy. Do you know, sometimes, dearie, I feel as if I could dash my head against a wall from sheer torment of rage and despair. I can't bear to see her talking to any other man; every smile which she gives to those who speak to her, cuts my heart like a knife, and yet I dare not say a word to her of the thoughts that are bursting my breast I feel like a fool, and stammer and stutter over the simplest phrase, when those sweet violet eyes of hers

turn on my face. Mother, I don't know how I can stand it," and poor Joseph Nettley turned his face towards the dark grey mountains in the far distance, and his eyes glistened with tears of love and rage.

CHAPTER XII.

In another carriage, driven in an opposite direction, a dialogue on precisely the same subject was being carried on ; but unfortunately there was little sympathy between the two who were engaged in it, and though there were tears in the eyes of one of them, they were tears of spite, selfishness, and annoyance, and they filled the eyes of Mrs. Lee.

No sooner had their carriage driven out of the gates of Government House, than Mrs. Lee opened fire, and poured into poor Violet's ears a very exaggerated repetition of what Mrs. Topman had told her about Jack Moresby's disappearance. She embroidered on all the little details and filled in the gaps in the story with all sorts of reasons and deductions, which did credit to her powers of romancing. According to her, Jack Moresby and his overseer had

been recognised by Mr. Smith, as the two men who had made the unsuccessful burglarious attack on his house and property. There was no doubt at all about it; in fact Mrs. Topman had told her that the attorney-general said that warrants for the arrest of the two young men had already been issued, or were about to be put in motion.

Indeed Mrs. Lee expressed herself as sincerely grieved by the whole affair; couldn't realize at all how a gentleman coming from such a good old family as the Moresby's too, could possibly have given way to such temptation. It was really quite too dreadful to think of.

Violet, on hearing the imputations thrown on Jack's character, the dreadful suspicions running all through Mrs. Lee's story, had been thoroughly indignant and utterly refused to believe a single word of the whole affair.

"The story is a fabrication, mother, from beginning to end; I don't believe for one moment a single statement made by that horrid little stutterer, and certainly not when they are repeated by Mrs. Topman.

Indeed, I am almost sure that you do not believe a word of it to be true yourself either, mother, and I think you are simply telling me all this from a motive which I believe I can guess."

"Oh, Violet, my dear Violet, how could you say such a thing! it is really dreadful to hear you talk in this way. Sometimes I could almost bring myself to doubt you are my own daughter!" and Mrs. Lee began to sniff in a plaintive manner, and then applied a diminutive little lace-edged handkerchief to the corners of her eyes under her white veil. "It is really quite unnatural of you, Violet," she went on, "to behave like this, especially just now when we are on the eve of being thrown out on the world to die in absolute beggary," and the poor lady wept woefully.

"But, dear mother, what have I done?" asked Violet taking possession of one of her mother's hands, and trying to console her. "You say I have behaved unnaturally, what have I done, dear?"

"Done!" tearfully exclaimed Mrs. Lee, snatching away her hand, "done, no, it is not what you have done, child, but what

you will not do. You know the dreadful position we are in, the fearful straits in which we soon shall be. You know that in a few weeks, months at most, we shall have to leave the dear old home, the house where I came to when I was married, where you and your sister were born, and where your poor father died. Your poor little sister, too, who is so delicate and requires so much care and comfort, she will die of the dreadful change!" and poor Mrs. Lee burst into a regular flood of tears. "I do not say anything for myself in all this, Violet, but you know how delicate I am, and how unable to stand hardships; my heart, I am sure, is very weak, indeed the doctor said so, and the shock of leaving all my dear old surroundings will probably kill me. Oh, Violet, my dear child, knowing all this, how can you remain callous to it all, and do nothing when you know it is entirely in your power to—to—" And Mrs. Lee raised her tearful eyes to Violet in a manner which made the poor girl feel utterly wretched.

"Oh, mother dear, don't ask me that d—don't," she entreated, almost in tears

herself. "I can guess what you mean, but, please—please don't ask that of me. I could not marry anyone I did not love, even though, if by so doing, I should make you all happy and free from anxiety. Don't despair, dear mother! things may not be so bad as they seem just now; the attorney perhaps was too hasty and has not done his best to raise money, we may—"

"Oh, don't talk in that absurd way, you cruel girl," pettishly answered Mrs. Lee, who for a moment had fondly hoped that Violet had been almost won over to her entreaties, and would consent to marry Joseph Nettley, or one of the other wealthy bachelors who would willingly wed her, even at the price which Mrs. Lee determined to set upon her consent, namely the redemption of the plantation from its present load of debt. "You know well, Violet, how useless it is to talk like that, and I cannot imagine how it is that you don't see how cruel, heartless and selfish it is of you to act in the way you are doing. There is that thoroughly good young fellow with a splendid income—you know of whom I am talking—who would do anything for

you, and would stop at nothing to please you. You would only have to say one word to make him intensely happy, and I am perfectly sure that he would think nothing of clearing off every debt on the estate, and of making you a present of it. If you had not in your head, Violet, some foolish ideas about that young fellow Moresby, whose acquaintance even now would be a disgrace, and who, as I have said to you before, was most probably only philandering with you; in fact, I have heard that his moral conduct at Palm Vale was not a bit better than that of any of the other young planters about there, and——"

"Enough, mother you can spare yourself the trouble of saying any more. I know all that by heart now, and if there be anything which can cause me more than another, to persist in my present way of thinking, it is to bring up Mr. Moresby's name, over and over again, as you are constantly doing. You talk of selfishness, mother, and yet you ask me to sacrifice my whole life in order that you should be spared the slightest discomfort. It is too much—and—and——" here poor Violet could not

restrain the tears which welled up in her eyes.

Her life was getting unbearable, and the last six months had been very different to the happy existence she had led in England with her loving aunt, to whom her slightest wish was law, and whose greatest pleasure had been to make her adopted daughter perfectly happy.

Sometimes Violet felt that it was perhaps her duty to fall in with her mother's views, and that she ought to marry some worthy man who would be satisfied to wed her without first gaining her love ; and thereby secure to Mrs. Lee the comfort and luxury which were indispensable to her. But then the thought of Jack would rise up like an impenetrable barrier to thoughts of marriage with anyone else. He might possibly not care for her, after all, and be only, as Mrs. Lee was never weary of asserting, philandering with her, but still she could not banish his image from her heart's mind, and especially now that he was so unaccountably absent and probably in trouble, her thoughts were more than ever with him. In fact, as she had said to

her mother, nothing could cause her to remember Jack so much, as Mrs. Lee's persistent innuendoes and sarcastic remarks about him and his attentions to her.

The drive home was ended in silence, only broken by periodical little sobs from Mrs. Lee, who sincerely considered that Fate had been very cruel to her, especially in giving her a daughter who cared so little for her comfort, and who was so unwilling to do anything towards alleviating their troubles.

As we know, Violet had left her mother when she was quite a little girl, and, with the exception of a few occasions at wide intervals, when Mrs. Lee and her husband had visited the old country, she had seen very little of her mother until she had returned to Grenadilla just after the unfortunate death of her kind aunt who had acted as the best of parents to her. Violet's feelings and those of Mrs. Lee towards each other were not such as generally exist between a mother and daughter, and there was wanting that sympathy and heartfelt love which make parents and children the dearest and best friends of one another, and cause them to look leniently and tenderly on any little

faults and defects which may exist on either side. Violet could hardly realize when she came out to Grenadilla, that the delicate little languid woman who greeted her almost ceremoniously in the house where she was born, was indeed her mother; and coming empty-handed as she did, instead of as the hope and mainstay of the family, poor Violet often felt like an interloper, and feared that Mrs. Lee looked upon her as a drag on her precarious resources.

The next day Mrs. Lee was lying in a long wicker-work chair in a shady corner of the spacious verandah which, as is the case with most West Indian houses, almost entirely surrounded the building.

It was a deliciously cool spot, and contrasted delightfully with the glare and heat of the tropical noonday outside. Everything was still and peaceful, and not a sound broke the calmness of the air, save now and then the whirr of a tiny humming-bird's jewelled wings, as it darted in and out of the rose bushes which clustered round the broad piazza.

Poor Mrs. Lee was feeling very weak and

delicate this morning, and as she reclined in her long chair, with a white lace mantilla over her hair and her hands listlessly folded on her lap, she looked very fragile, and quite unfit to stand the troubles which were closing in on her from all sides. Her eyes were moist and weak, and the unhappy lady was now quite unable to banish, as she used to do, all the unpleasant thoughts and fears which now utterly refused to be lightly put aside. She could, however, hardly bring herself to realize that in a very short space of time, she and her daughters would have to give up their comfortable home to strangers, and that they were about to be thrust out into the cold world, to battle with poverty and all its attendant miseries. No more would she be mistress of a luxurious house, with servants to obey her slightest wish, no more pleasant drives in the cool evenings in her own comfortable carriage, no more elegant and refined little dinners, such, as it was generally admitted, none but she in Grenadilla could give. Poor Mrs. Lee felt as if it would be utterly impossible for her to do without all these things, and the hundred and one other luxuries and comforts

which she considered indispensable, and to which she had always been accustomed. It never seemed to occur to her that this dreadful reverse might most probably have been entirely averted by a little care and prudence on her part, and that the hopeless crisis which had at last arrived had been almost entirely due to her persistent refusal to listen to any advice that was offered to her. Such thoughts as these never troubled her for an instant. She was now only dazed and overcome by the sudden blow that had fallen upon her, and which she knew not how to avert.

The sound of wheels coming up the avenue roused her from her painful reverie, and it was with considerable pleasure and no little surprise that she greeted Mrs. Nettley, as the servant ushered the old lady into the verandah.

"How good of you to come and see me, my dear Mrs. Nettley, and in the middle of all this heat too. Wasn't it rather imprudent?

"Oh, I'm strong enough, my dear," answered the old lady, as she sank into an easy chair beside Mrs. Lee. "And although

the sun is very hot, there is a delightful breeze, which blew straight into the buggy, as I drove along, and it made the little journey quite pleasant."

Mrs. Lee, although delighted to see the little old lady, inwardly wondered what could be the object of her visit, and especially at that early hour of the day. Rockmount was four or five miles away, and she had already had a visit from Mrs. Nettley a few days before. Her curiosity was aroused and she could not help asking her visitor if anything had happened, as although she was delighted to see her, and was extremely sorry that they lived so far apart, she thought that something unusual must have occurred to bring her out so early.

"Well, my dear Mrs. Lee, you are quite right, the motive of my visit is an unusual one, and I may as well disclose it at once. There is nothing very pressing, however, but as my son and I promised to spend the day with the Selbys, who are quite near you, Joseph rode alone to their place, and I made a little round, in order to have a chat with you on a certain matter which affects the happiness of all of us."

"Dear Mrs. Nettley," answered Mrs. Lee with effusion, and bending over to take one of the old lady's hands in hers, "what can it all be about? I am dying to hear, and please be assured that you will have in me a most sympathetic listener."

Although her curiosity was greatly aroused, still Mrs. Lee thought she could make a very fair guess at the nature of the matter which Mrs. Nettley had come over to chat about. She was almost sure that it related to her pet project, and was at the same time intensely chagrined to think of all the difficulties that lay in the way of its realization, difficulties too which appeared to her very unnatural and senseless.

Mrs. Nettley slowly drew off her black gloves and paused, as if to consider how she had better begin.

"As I said before, my dear, the object of my visit is an unusual one, and you will probably be surprised when you hear it. However, if we had been French people, the course I am taking would be considered quite the correct thing, and the usual line of action pursued in such cases. Well, my dear, after this introduction, let me plunge

at once into the matter. I have come to see you this morning in the guise of an old match-making mamma."

Mrs. Lee here indulged her feelings by a little "oh!" which seemed to express quite a small multitude of sensations, in which however, surprise and satisfaction predominated.

"Yes, my dear Mrs. Lee," continued the old lady, bending forward in her easy chair, "You are no doubt surprised, and wondering all sorts of things, but from what you said to my poor boy last night, I am sure you know to what I am referring, and in that case we can pass over a lot of unnecessary explanations. You must have noticed that Joseph has admired Violet very much, ever since he first saw her. 'Admired,' indeed, is not the word which should be used to convey the dear boy's feelings. He most truly and devotedly loves Violet, and I feel sure that with him it is no fleeting fancy or flirtation, such as young men are apt to indulge in. You know what a dear good steady fellow he is, so affectionate, noble, and so thoroughly honourable too, that he would never think of trifling with any girl's affection."

"Ah, I am sure, he is all that, my dear Mrs. Nettley," replied Violet's mother, "and often, ah, how often, have I envied you the possession of such a dear, good son," and the good lady began to manipulate her diminutive little handkerchief in a manner which presaged the imminent approach of tears.

"He is, he is a dear, good son," repeated the old lady, her face flushing with motherly love and truest affection. "He is not so showy and handsome as many other men are, perhaps," she continued, "but his thorough goodness is apparent to all, and the girl who is fortunate enough to marry him will have the best husband she could possibly possess. But, dear me, I am not getting on with my mission. I have come here entirely on my own responsibility, and Joe knows nothing of my intended visit. We had a long chat last evening, when returning from Government House, and the dear boy confessed to me that he was utterly miserable, and that his whole life would be for ever darkened and ruined, unless Violet would accept him as her husband. Now, as you know, my dear poor Joseph is one of the most nervous timid men in existence, and is terribly afraid

of women. He simply worships Violet, but at a distance, and declares that he could never muster up sufficient courage to tell her of his love and ask her for hers in return."

Here Mrs. Nettley paused for a moment, hoping that her hostess might say something, but she was disappointed. Mrs. Lee could say nothing; her thin white hands twitched convulsively, and her little lace handkerchief was used once or twice to dry the moistness which was gathering in the corners of her eyes.

The old lady was forced to continue. "So now, my dear, I have come to you, as if I were a French mother, to ask your daughter's hand for my son; or, at least, I want you to find out what are her feelings towards him. I want to be able to tell Joseph that he may pluck up courage, and that Violet is not indifferent to him. Oh, my dear Mrs. Lee, you can't think how happy I should be to tell him that, for, during the last two or three months, he has become quite changed; his cheerfulness has left him, he takes hardly any interest in anything at 'Rockmount,' and I can see

that his whole mind is wrapped up in hopes and fears concerning your dear girl Violet."

"I can't ask her now, my dear Mrs. Nettley," broke in Mrs. Lee, who saw that her only hope lay in procrastinating a little. "Violet is out, somewhere on the Estate, I think, and I had better see her alone."

"Oh, of course, yes. There is no immediate hurry, although the sooner my poor boy's suspense is settled one way or the other, the better, for he really cannot go on as he is at present. But, tell me honestly, my dear, what do you think? You must know something of Violet's feelings; she must have spoken now and then of my boy or of the other young men she has seen in Grenadilla. What does she think about him?"

Mrs. Lee was completely at her wits' end. She could not bring herself to tell Mrs. Nettley the whole truth, and relate to her what Violet had said and repeated over and over again, whenever she had done the very thing which the old lady was now asking her to do. She determined to temporize and trusted to another final attempt to

overcome Violet's resistance to her views. Consequently, she confined her answer simply to saying that Violet did not seem to think of marrying, and that her daughter had always spoken of Joseph Nettley in terms which showed that she was quite sensible of all his good qualities. "You know," she went on, "young girls, before they are four or five and twenty, hardly know their own mind, and although Violet may have never seriously thought of your son as a possible husband, I am sure she cannot remain untouched by such sincere devotion as his."

Mrs. Lee knew that she was prevaricating and saying more than she should, but the poor thing clung with the tenacity of a drowning man to what she considered was the best chance of redeeming herself and daughters from hopeless misery.

"Indeed, my dear old friend," she went on, "you can't think how anxious I am to see Violet comfortably settled in life, and with a good husband to love and protect her; my anxieties and troubles are at present quite too dreadful to think of, and, indeed, I feel as if I shall very soon sink

under them and find a last refuge in the grave."

Poor Mrs. Lee, here quite broke down, for the thought suddenly presented itself to her, that if she died away from Belvoir, the next owners of the estate might possibly not allow her remains to be laid to rest beside those of her husband, whose tombstone she could just see from the verandah, gleaming white under the delicate lace-like shadows thrown by the graceful bamboos which enclosed the little private cemetery.

"My dear, my dear," murmured the kind-hearted old lady, putting her arm round the sobbing woman, "don't talk and cry like that, dear. What is it? what is giving you such anxiety? I always thought you were so happy with your two daughters and your comfortable old home. Tell me all about it, dear, if you can, it may ease you a little."

"Oh, my daughters are good enough to me," rejoined Mrs. Lee, while her tears fell thick and fast, "but can you wonder at my being utterly broken down at the thought of being about to be thrown out into the cold world with my two poor girls, to

starve in absolute beggary," and she looked up at the old lady with streaming eyes.

"To starve in absolute beggary," repeated Mrs. Nettley. "Nonsense, dear, what are you talking about? I can't believe my ears."

"Ah, unfortunately, unhappily, it is all too true. Yes, in a few weeks at most, the estate, and most likely everything I possess, will be taken from me. The plantation has not paid its expenses for I don't know how many years, and now the mortgagees are calling for their money and have foreclosed."

Mrs. Nettley was astounded. Like most other people in Grenadilla, she had always supposed that Mrs. Lee was very comfortably off, and although it had been a matter of wonder to many, how Mrs. Lee managed to live in the style she did on the income afforded by a sugar estate in these bad times, most people supposed that her husband must have left her a comfortable amount of ready money at his death.

"My poor dear," said the old lady, "surely you must be exaggerating your troubles. Things cannot be as bad as you

say they are. And then you surprise me! I never had the slightest idea that you could be in difficulties, or that your estate was involved in any way. Who are your agents? surely money can still be raised in some way or other?"

"No, no," tearfully interrupted Mrs. Lee, "no, it appears, from what my attorney says—indeed, you might as well see his letter, and then you can realize from that the desperate straits of my position," and Mrs. Lee handed to the old lady the missive in question.

As Mrs. Nettley had said, she was indeed very much surprised to hear of the precarious condition of Mrs. Lee's prospects, and she sincerely felt for the poor woman in her sad predicament, knowing well how utterly unfit she was to battle against difficulties and troubles which even a strong-minded woman might shun to contemplate. She glanced through the letter in a moment and saw by the tone of it that matters must indeed be in a hopeless state.

"Isn't it quite too dreadful," said poor Mrs. Lee, shading her eyes from the glare of the sun with her thin white hand, which

looked almost transparent as it was held up to the light, "what am I to do? I can't realise my position at all. It seems so utterly impossible that in a short time this dear old place, to which my husband brought me twenty-one years ago, will be taken away from me, and that I shall be turned out by a lot of dreadful strangers, who will live here as if the place had always belonged to them." Here the poor woman's overwrought feelings entirely gave way, and she broke out in a storm of uncontrollable weeping.

The kind old lady was much affected by the sight of Mrs. Lee's grief. "Don't, don't, my dear," she said, pillowing the weeping woman's head on her motherly bosom, "don't give way like that or despair about the future; don't fret so, dearie, God will provide, and indeed," she continued, "although I have no real authority for saying so, I feel sure that Joseph would be only too happy to set at rest forever all your anxieties on the score of the estate, if Violet would allow him to do so."

There it was! Everything happening just as Mrs. Lee had presaged. There was

good honest Joseph Nettley, offering himself as a suitor for Violet's hand and only too willing to be allowed to assure the comfort of Mrs. Lee's remaining days. It now only rested with Violet to determine whether all the terrible probabilities, brought into such unmistakable prominence by the attorney's letter, were to be carried out in the immediate future, or whether her mother's anxieties were to be entirely set at rest, and the comfortable home and luxury to which she had always been accustomed, assured to her and her crippled daughter for the remainder of their lives.

Mrs. Lee could not make up her mind, on the spur of the moment, what to say. Under cover of her tears she was wondering what answer she might give to Mrs. Nettley. She fully determined that she would not leave a stone unturned to overcome Violet's resistance, and she could hardly indeed bring herself to believe that her daughter could possibly remain for ever obdurate in the face of the dire predicament in which they now found themselves, when the remedy lay so close at hand. Mrs. Lee at last wiped her eyes and kissed the old

lady affectionately on both cheeks. "I really don't know what to say, my dear Mrs. Nettley, and all this trouble makes my poor head whirl so when I try to think about anything, I really can't tell what Violet's answer may be; I do trust it will be a favourable one, for I shall have almost as much interest in it as your dear son has.

"I would not have her feelings influenced in the slightest degree by any pecuniary considerations," broke in the old lady, "for I love my son too much to be instrumental in making a marriage for him where there would not be love on both sides. I think there is nothing more terrible than those *mariages de convenance*, and I would be the last to assist or countenance any project of marriage for my dear boy, where he would be accepted more for the sake of his possessions than for his own self."

Mrs. Lee drew herself away a little, and felt in a degree hurt. "Surely, my dear Mrs. Nettley, you could not imagine for a moment that I would attempt to influence Violet's mind in any measure which would affect the happiness of her whole life, from

any selfish motives of interest on my part. I—I—indeed——"

"Of course not, my dear friend, you misunderstood me! I am sure you are quite as anxious for the welfare of your daughter as I am for the future of my dear boy, but then, it seems to me as if girls are not nowadays what they used to be in our time. I fear that many of them think more about getting a husband who can provide them with all sorts of luxuries and comforts, than of marrying a man simply for love of his own good qualities, as they used to do in the old-fashioned days."

Mrs. Lee had really felt quite virtuously indignant for a moment at the mere thought of being capable of influencing her daughter from mercenary motives, and indeed, she never looked upon her match-making projects in anything approaching to that light. She would, in fact, have been the very first person to say and think harsh things of any mother who could act in that manner, and she had thoroughly persuaded herself that all her pet plans for Violet's future were quite as much prompted by maternal solicitude as by any other idea she

might have had in connection with her own troubles and anxieties.

At that moment the interesting conference of the two ladies was interrupted by the appearance on the scene of the object of their conversation. Violet had just returned from a visit to the negro yard, where she had been delighting an invalid old black woman by the sunshine of her presence and kindly interest. In her hand was a little empty basket, which had contained a few small delicacies which she had distributed to some of the estate labourers who were lying sick, and in her arms she carried a huge sheaf of gloriously-coloured croton cuttings which had been given to her on the way. Violet's face lit up with pleasure when she saw Mrs. Nettley, for the dear old lady with her soft, snow-white hair, fresh-coloured cheeks, and kind, motherly eyes was an especial favourite of hers, and reminded her in a way of the good aunt whom she had loved so much.

"Well, dearie, how are you?" asked the old lady, as she kissed her. "You look like a rosebud peeping over the top of your hedge of crotons. I won't wait for your

answer, though, my dear, as I have already stayed longer than I ought to, and must be wending my way over the hill, to the Selby's. Your dear mother and I have been having a long chat over something which concerns you, and your little pink ears must have tingled considerably during the last half-hour. Perhaps you can guess the subject of our chat, dearie, but you will hear all about it directly, so I will just 'gang awa' the noo.'"

Violet and her mother escorted the old lady back to her carriage, and, after saying good-bye to Mrs. Lee, Joseph's mother warmly embraced Violet, whispering in her ear, as she did so, a few words, which at first rather mystified the young girl.

END OF VOLUME I.

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